THE ANATOMY OF CONSCIENCE: SCIENCE, ETHICS, AND RELIGION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Jane F. Thrailkill)

“The Anatomy of Conscience” examines how nineteenth-century American fiction figures a trajectory between Revolutionary physician Benjamin Rush’s speculations about a citizenry physiologically optimized for virtuous self-governance to physician and novelist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.’s postbellum vision of a reformed ethics and theology informed by the biological theory of heredity. It argues that a rarely-linked group of novelists—Hannah Foster, Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, Herman Melville, and Holmes—use fiction to imagine into being new ethical and theological worlds inspired by emerging biological ideas.

During the roughly hundred years separating Rush and Holmes, writers represented how new biological ideas transformed humans from blank slates capable of stunning moral change to beings burdened by the moral weight of not only their own bodies but those of their ancestors, preserved through the biological mechanism of heredity. Tracing writers’ fictionalization of the biological developments that took place between Rush and Holmes reveals the ways that literature intervened in myriad debates about emerging modes of understanding vice, virtue, and sin. Fiction, by transforming, testing, and disseminating these debates, shaped them even as they dramatized them. In doing so, I argue, it gave form to the materialist turn of the twentieth century by locating vice and virtue in terms that are as much physiological as they are moral, legal, or theological.
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INTRODUCTION

“The Anatomy of Conscience” examines how nineteenth-century American fiction figures a trajectory between Revolutionary physician Benjamin Rush’s speculations about a citizenry physiologically optimized for virtuous self-governance to physician and novelist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.’s postbellum vision of a reformed ethics and theology informed by the biological theory of heredity. It argues that a rarely-linked group of novelists—Hannah Foster, Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, Herman Melville, and Holmes—use fiction to imagine into being new ethical and theological worlds inspired by emerging biological ideas. Rush’s numerous postrevolutionary essays posit citizens’ ethical capacities as almost infinitely moldable and therefore available to governance: he views the new republic as an opportunity for enlightened social policy to create a morally perfect nation. Holmes, conversant with mid-nineteenth-century theories of heredity, understands humans’ ethical capacities as inflected and limited by their ancestry. Rather than follow Rush and alter the individual to fit society, a task he believes to be a lost cause, he wishes to fit society to the range of moral capabilities heredity affords. During the roughly hundred years separating these two iconic American physicians, writers represented how new biological ideas transformed humans from blank slates capable of stunning moral change to beings burdened by the moral weight of not only their own bodies but those of their ancestors, preserved through the biological mechanism of heredity. Tracing writers’ fictionalization of the biological developments that took place between Rush and Holmes reveals the ways that literature intervened in myriad debates about emerging modes of understanding vice, virtue, and sin. Fiction, by transforming, testing, and disseminating these
debates, shaped them even as they dramatized them. In doing so, I argue, it gave form to the materialist turn of the twentieth century by locating vice and virtue in terms that are as much physiological as they are moral, legal, or theological.

This dissertation contends that the emergence of physiology as a way of understanding cognition and behavior in the late eighteenth century, which sparked ethical and religious controversies that played out on a broad literary-cultural stage through the Civil War, provoked problems that were depicted and addressed in fiction. Writers figured how nineteenth-century physiological thinking—incarnated in both “professional” disciplines such as lab physiology and “popular” disciplines such as phrenology—imagined humans as subject to (and comprised of) a variety of historically and culturally specific somatic phenomena, including nervous tension, inherited moral character, over- or under-developed phrenological bumps, and vibrations of the nervous fluid. As “nervousness,” the belief that the nerves bind mind and body into an ontological whole, came to “characterize[] the basic psychological assumption of the century,” then, fiction depicted consequent ethical, theological, and legal controversies about sleepwalking killers, the insanity defense, and a purportedly hereditary criminal class developed (Murison 2). In doing so, it made physiology’s repercussions for ethics and religion a matter of popular concern.

Through chapters centered on novels by Charles Brockden Brown, Hannah Foster, Robert Montgomery Bird, Herman Melville, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., I argue that literature, particularly novels, was crucial in articulating these medico-philosophical ideas and debates for a wide audience. When Benjamin Rush sought to shape Americans of the early republic into “republican machines” physiologically optimized for virtuous self-governance, Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* and Foster’s *The Coquette* expressed doubt about such a project by
depicting the ethical morass to which it might lead. Likewise, Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* (1836) dramatizes conservative fears that the emergence of physiological theories of mental disease in the 1830s would erase personal responsibility by depicting a protagonist who draws on the language of medicine to exculpate himself of responsibility for his actions. Yet in the following decades, dietary reformers tied moral character to digestive health: Melville draws on their ideas in his characterization of the Pequod’s crew (and their stomachs), in doing so supporting reformers’ insistence on the primacy of the body in moral life. Holmes by the 1880s wrote two novels that depict their subjects in terms of the science of heredity; the plots of these novels articulate a naturalistic doctrine of original sin, setting in motion an ideology of moral disability that would underwrite both the (progressive) insanity defense and the (regressive) pseudo-science of eugenics. Nineteenth-century novelists, I argue, built narrative laboratories in which biology’s metaphysical repercussions were not only tested but transformed, creating ways to explore new and controversial moral worlds.

By arguing that fiction written by Foster, Holmes, and others use narrative elements such as plot, figuration, and characterization to intervene in contemporary ethical controversies, this project argues for considering the relationship between narrative and ethics in historicist terms. Most scholarship on narrative and ethics, since the 1990s heavily indebted to the phenomenological ethics of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, argues that narrative itself is a form of ethics, an argument that typically entails defining the novel as a genre unique in its ethical capabilities. By emphasizing character psychology and social relations, and by focusing on the particularities of human subjectivity, a representative claim might go, novels can assuage and even prevent the ethical harm caused by the categorizations we inflict on each other: racism, sexism, classism, etc. Narrative, writes Adam Zachary Newton, is ethically powerful because it
“creates an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (13). Martha Nussbaum claims that narrative "searches for patterns of possibility—of choice and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance—that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as our possibilities" (171). One of the tasks of the critic, then, would be to explicate the narrative “relations” (Newton) and “patterns” (Nussbaum) that frame the sorts of ethical values that are so persistent throughout time that they remain relevant for current-day readers. The works found in most “Great Books” curricula are thought to have lasting moral value because they provide insight into immutable, persistent aspects of the human condition. Yet addressing only those ethical relations, patterns, and values that remain legible to twenty-first-century sensibilities tends either to neglect historically particular modes of ethical expression or to distort them into more comfortable or familiar current-day forms. Attending to the ways that nineteenth-century American fiction addresses contemporary ethical problems and controversies with narrative provides a new way of thinking about the relationship between narrative and ethics that is, compared to the narrative ethics practiced by Newton and Nussbaum, more historically grounded—and, in this dissertation, more attentive to the body.

Instead of arguing for nineteenth-century American literature’s enduring moral value, this dissertation traces how writers such as Bird and Melville use fiction as a way to participate in and shape the ethical and theological debates attendant to the emergence of physiology. Taking what Lorraine Daston calls “historical epistemology” as the foundation of my historicist methodology, I investigate how these debates arise from multiple, competing ways of
conceptualizing such ideas as virtue, culpability, and sin (282). ¹ I analyze fiction’s engagements with emerging ethical and theological concepts not as part a Whiggish history of progression towards a more enlightened, more sophisticated, more scientific, or otherwise “better” set of stories or values but as vibrant, historically particular conceptual assemblages with no intrinsic telos. Likewise, I read physiology and the numerous popular sciences kin to it not as agents of a historically transcendent heteropatriarchal, imperial, hegemonic oppression, which extracts science from the social and epistemological conditions of its time, or as reductivist and thus antithetical to humanist inquiry, but as an important parts of culture, including the novels that are the subject of this dissertation.²

Each chapter treats a set of texts that contributed or responded to a historically specific problem regarding new physiological ideas’ repercussions for ethics and religion. The first chapter focuses on how novels written by Hannah Foster and Charles Brockden Brown figure eighteenth-century theories of habit expressed by John Locke, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, and early criminologists that rendered porous the previously impermeable conceptual division between voluntary and involuntary action. The second chapter addresses the ways that

¹ Daston writes that she understands historical epistemology as “the history of the categories that structure our thought, pattern our arguments and proofs, and certify our standards for explanation” (282).

² A number of critics take science as a point of origin for Foucauldian analyses of power. Joan Burbick, in her study of health discourses in nineteenth-century America, writes that “ruthless attempts are made to differentiate bodies into hierarchies of sexual, racial, and class differences” when the body emerges “as that which society must confront and explain” (3). “To read the narratives of the healthy body,” she continues, “is to begin to understand the relationships of power and subordination that societies attempt to render invisible” (3). In contrast, theorist Vicki Kirby urges humanists not to think of science as “a bad boy whose penetrative and instrumental logic must be distinguished from more poetic, creative, and generous curiosities” or as “inherently conservative” but as a way to limber up their anthropocentric views of the world (15, 71).
Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* takes part in controversies arising from broadening definitions of mental disease and the insanity defense that were fostered by physicians such as Rush and James Cowles Prichard in the 1830s. In the third chapter, I examine how Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* draws on contemporary physiological theories of the brain’s relationship to the stomach, popularized by dietary reformers such as Sylvester Graham, to characterize Ishmael, Queequeg, and even Moby Dick. The fourth chapter centers on how Holmes’s first two novels, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* and *The Guardian Angel*, emplot the ethics of inherited moral debility, a latecentury concept that underwrites both a broadening of the idea of diminished moral capacity and the logic of eugenicism.

By organizing the chapters this way, I situate literature among medical treatises, political speeches, and legal decisions as constitutive of the problems I examine. I read literary texts as doing what literary critic Jane Tompkins calls “cultural work,” or as “articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” and as “providing men and women with a means of ordering the world they inhabited” (xi, xiii). Literature, I argue, does not merely reflect the world but acts upon it by offering readers ways to think through and be affected by new modes of understanding ethics and religion. In turn, I read other textual genres through literary modes of analysis such as close reading and interpretation, particularly when seemingly stable concepts change as they pass through different disciplinary regimes or as they overlap with other concepts.

“The Anatomy of Conscience” begins in the late eighteenth century, when the public was riveted by newspaper accounts of murders committed by sleepwalkers acting by force of habit. Habit, theorized by physicians as the bodily principle enabling automatic action, posed vexing questions about the body’s role in volition and responsibility that would reappear throughout the
nineteenth century. The dissertation’s first chapter, “‘The Empire of Mechanical and Habitual Impulses’: Habit and Responsibility in the Early American Republic,” examines how novels by Hannah Foster and Charles Brockden Brown emplot three recurring issues attendant to late eighteenth-century theories of habit: the body’s influence on behavior, the biological limits of responsibility, and the contested boundary between rationality and irrationality. This chapter traces how the plots of Foster’s and Brown’s novels depict the ethical uncertainties caused by the emergence of habit as a means of addressing morality and spirituality in the early republican context. To lay the historical groundwork for my literary analysis, I situate habit within the intersecting scientific, philosophical, and cultural fields it occupied, including John Locke’s associationism, David Hartley’s physiology, Rush’s pedagogy, Franklin’s self-improvement regimes, and early criminology. These fields are not as disparate as they may seem, for they are linked by habit as what Rush calls a “general law” of human nature. From Locke’s and Hartley’s speculations on habit’s role in physiology and psychology, I argue, habit became thinkable as a way of understanding how the machinery of human nature operates without conscious direction; it also became a way to imagine the body as open to conditioning such that vice and virtue might be automated.

In *The Coquette* (1797), Lucy Freeman, who attempts to educate her friend Eliza Wharton on the dangers seducer Peter Sanford poses, articulates a consequentialist approach to habitual vice yet finds that her moral lectures are of no avail. But Foster creates a narrative that allows readers to experience and be affected by, albeit at a remove, the consequences of Eliza’s seduction. In *Wieland* (1798), Brown dramatizes how habit’s dissociation of action and intent makes it difficult to make sure assessments of moral accountability. For both writers, literary form reveals the ethical worlds habit makes available. Habit emerged as a way for Americans of
the early republic to understand their bodies’ automatic actions, and it made persons thinkable as simultaneously (and paradoxically, from a current-day perspective) as both moldable and fixed.

An individual was malleable, free, and agential in that her very physical makeup was plastic and open to impression by experience; experience affected her physiology, altering, in Hartley’s neurophysiology, the vibrations of the infinitesimal particles suspended in her nervous fluid and enabling Rush’s hope that the new nation’s citizenry might be comprised of “republican machines.” Yet she was fixed, determined, and instinctual in that she was understood as habituated to and by her experiences and bound, in time, to her habits. In the context of this theory of human nature, to moralize—to interpret something as containing a moral lesson, as both Foster and Brown ask their readers to do—is to take into account how habit merges not only malleability and fixedness but also similar “oppositional concepts like freedom/determination, natural/artificial, active/passive, cause/effect, spontaneity/instinct, and agent/patient” (Sparrow and Hutchinson 4-5).

The second chapter, “Between Vice and Disease: Moral Insanity, Sheppard Lee, and the Ethics of Embodiment,” argues that Sheppard Lee, by physician Robert Montgomery Bird, addresses a set of ethical quandaries that arose when neurophysiology took habit’s place as a way of explaining automatic behavior in the early nineteenth century. The novel’s protagonist can invest his consciousness into any corpse he touches; he finds that each body carries within it an innate physiological character that changes his natural affections and instincts. In the novel he jumps from body to body, all the while, echoing the somnambulant murderers, blaming his actions on his (borrowed) flesh. I tie Lee’s actions to controversies surrounding moral insanity, a mental disease that, like Lee’s serial embodiment, disorders one’s temperament but not one’s intellect. Physicians such as Benjamin Rush and James Cowles Prichard used moral insanity to
argue that that one can be rational but still insane, contrary to prevailing medical and legal viewpoints. These physicians and the legal theorists who sought to integrate their arguments into criminal law raised questions about how to distinguish between insane persons and those who act in unusual or undesirable ways but are still sane. Yet many Americans found new theories of insanity productive of ethical and legal grey areas susceptible to abuse by criminals who would attribute their actions to insanity. I argue that Sheppard Lee reprises popular fears that moral insanity would eliminate responsibility.

In the third chapter, “Digesting Moby-Dick: Stomach, Brain, and Text,” I argue that Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick figures the ethical aspects of midcentury dietary reform by characterizing the Pequod’s crew in terms of their ingestion and digestion. I claim that in doing so, Moby-Dick’s characters enact the philosophical, religious, and racial repercussions of dietary reform. Attending to digestion in Moby-Dick, I claim, illuminates how the novel counters Emersonian hopes of transcending the body by affirming its centrality to moral life. The chapter draws on a rich archive of texts on diet and digestion. By the 1840s and 50s, many Americans, moved by the midcentury spirit of reform embodied by women’s clothing reformers, prohibitionists, and utopian communes such as Brook Farm, looked favorably upon biological ideas as a way to better the nation and its citizens. It is within this milieu that dietary reform emerged as a means of physiological self-management. Antebellum physiology envisioned neural and alimentary structures as anatomically and functionally linked, joined by the “sympathetic nerve” (now termed the vagus nerve) stretching from brain to stomach. Eating the right food, physicians and reformers alike reasoned, makes for a healthy brain; conversely, a stomach irritated by improper digestion might disorder the brain and corrode the mind. This view was held by a diverse group including dietary reformers, cookbook authors, and physicians:
while domestic guides such as Catharine Beecher’s popular *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) urged the centrality of food to mental function, medical works such as Wilson Philip’s *Treatise on Indigestion and its Consequences, Called Nervous and Bilious Complaints* (1824) and James Johnson’s *Essays on the Morbid Sensibility of the Stomach and Bowels* (1827) and popular dietary reform movements such as Grahamism emphasized that common digestive troubles could lead to insanity. These and other writings argue that attending to one’s digestion by carefully monitoring the circumstances of one’s ingestion—specifically, what is ingested and in what manner—is the best way to maintain healthy mental function. *Moby-Dick*, I argue, makes salient questions about the philosophical, religious, and racial aspects of connecting diet and the mind in this way.

Whereas earlier chapters argue that novels by writers such as Brown and Bird express anxiety about the physiological limits of responsibility, “Tricks of the Blood: Heredity, Calvinism, and the Limits of Responsibility in Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.,” the final chapter, argues that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.’s first two novels, *Elsie Venner* (1861) and *The Guardian Angel* (1867) find in those limits a basis for a truer understanding of God’s justice and mercy. I argue that his novels take heredity (understood in biological terms) as foundational to the personalities and behavior of the characters that are their subjects, Elsie Venner and Myrtle Hazard. Both characters act in socially undesirable ways due to the constraints their heredity places upon them, but in both novels wise, medically trained characters and kindhearted ministers alike counsel that they be treated with sympathy and not be held fully responsible for their actions. I argue that this figuration of heredity critiques the doctrine of original sin, illuminating the conditions under which heredity became thinkable as a way to address ethical and theological issues in the late nineteenth century. I claim that Holmes’s novels, written on the
cusp of the Darwinian revolution, address how biological heredity might mitigate moral responsibility; further, I argue that doing so makes possible a set of ways of thinking about descent, destiny, and morality later used by eugenicists, although Holmes had no commitment to the cultural or political aims of the eugenicists themselves. In his novels’ exculpation of individuals driven by their heredity to vice of responsibility, they implicitly suggest that others should assume responsibility for them, opening the door to imagining inheritors of less desirable traits as best managed by a supposed hereditary elite. But the novels differs from eugenicist thought, I argue, in two respects: first, they address unwanted or dangerous inherited tendencies as treatable rather than as immutable parts of a person’s being; second, they depict such tendencies as the province of the community and individual rather than the state. Holmes’s novels thus depict heredity as powerful enough an influence that it limits human responsibility but not so powerful that it totally determines individuals’ moral capacities. By displacing the heredity of original sin with the heredity of biological science, they articulate a view of inheritance that allows for the amelioration of transmitted traits, giving form to a pliable heredity historically and conceptually situated between the twin hereditary determinisms of Calvinism and eugenics. I argue that Holmes’s shift from the allegorical mode in *Elsie Venner* to the realist mode in *The Guardian Angel* enables him to frame the latter novel as a narrative experiment whose results are applicable not only to the narrative’s characters but to the reader. When Holmes turns to the realist mode in *The Guardian Angel*, he adopts the authority of biology. He also, by putting the ethical and theological repercussions of that biology into narrative form, transforms it into new conceptual structures and disseminates them to the public. Drawing on Holmes’s early religious training and familiarity with Calvinist doctrine, I conclude that his novels do not diminish Christianity but rather articulate a version of it more in keeping with the
rule of their depiction of a just God. In this vision, the distinctions between science, ethics, and religion that obtained earlier in the century disperse.

The dissertation ends with a brief coda that connects nineteenth-century Americans’ attempts to navigate embodiment’s repercussions for ethics and religion with the current-day cultural changes arising from neuroscientific research. I identify fiction as a way to think through the new modes of ethical and religious being that neuroscience makes available.
CHAPTER ONE: “‘THE EMPIRE OF MECHANICAL AND HABITUAL IMPULSES’: HANNAH FOSTER, CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN, AND HABIT

“We are subject, by a general law in our natures, to what is called habit. Now, if the study of the Scriptures be necessary to our happiness at any time of our life, the sooner we begin to read them, the more we shall probably be attached to them; for it is peculiar to all the acts of habit, to become easy, strong, and agreeable by repetition.”

Benjamin Rush, “A Defense of the Use of the Bible as a School Book” (1791)

When Benjamin Rush wrote to Jeremy Belknap, a Boston minister and historian, advocating integrating the Bible into school curricula, he founded his case on the power of habit, by which repetition makes an action “easy, strong, and agreeable” (93). To a twenty-first century sensibility, such a conception of habit might seem familiar, for in our own time we too understand a habit as a behavior made easy and ingrained by repetition. But for Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and the most prominent physician of the early American republic, habit is not only a way of training behavior but also a fact of the body, “a general law in our natures” to which humans “are subject” (93). Habit, in Rush’s understanding, does not describe a fixed, repeated action but rather the body’s tendency to transform freely chosen, voluntary actions into actions that become pleasantly automatic (“easy, strong, and agreeable”) over time (93). Further, habit is for Rush a solution to what he views as one of the greatest questions facing the new nation: how improve the morals of the citizenry, making them fit to participate in self-governance. He hopes, ultimately, to harness citizens’ physiology to form them into “republican machines” who, being automatically virtuous, would “perform their parts
properly, in the great machine of the government of the state” (“Education” 14-15).

In this chapter I argue that Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) make salient a set of debates consequent to Rush’s theory of automated virtue and other contemporary efforts to link ethics with emerging conceptions of habit, including those of Benjamin Franklin and early criminologists. Although Rush and Franklin both view habit as a way to automate virtue, Colleen Terrell argues, they differ as to habitual actions’ ethical content (123). For Rush, who writes that “the mechanical effects of HABIT upon virtue, have not been sufficiently explored,” at times “virtues have been assumed by accident, or necessity, which have become real from habit, and afterwards derive their nourishment from the heart” (“Physical” 30). Here Rush implicitly distinguishes between virtues that begin as habits and then become “real,” thereafter drawing “their nourishment from the heart,” and those that remain “mechanical” (30). For Rush, the ethical content of a virtuous habit thus lies partly in whether it is nourished by the heart, or its emotional aspects. But Franklin makes no distinction between real or unreal, authentic or inauthentic, actions: what matters for him are an action’s consequences, not its motivations. Another set of ethical issues arose concerning those who, like “republican machines” running in reverse, habitually practice vice. Such “habitual criminals,” I argue, provoked epistemological and ethical quandaries about the influence of bodily processes on behavior, the biological limits of responsibility, and the malleability of human nature. If habit

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3 For Rush, goodness begins with citizens’ bodies. He states in a speech on “physical causes upon the moral faculty,” dedicated to Benjamin Franklin and given to the American Philosophical Society in 1786, that he is “fully persuaded” that with the judicious use of habit, diet, and other modes of affecting the human body “which operate at once upon the reason, the moral faculty, the passions, the senses, the brain, the nerves, the blood and the heart, it is possible to produce such a change in [a man’s] moral character, as shall raise him to a resemblance of angels—nay more, to the likeness of GOD himself (37). For Rush, habit is one of the tools by which an individual’s very physical substance (“the brain, the nerves, the blood and the heart”) might be altered in ways that render him Godlike—and, in his theory of government, a better republican.
describes a law of human nature by which voluntary actions become involuntary through repetition, then habitual vice presents the issue of whether it is fair to punish individuals for actions out of their control; the fault, if any, would lie in having acquired the habit at all.

Through readings of Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland, Or, The Transformation*, I claim that fiction of the early republic offers imaginative spaces in which readers can inhabit these issues. Both works are seduction novels, generically inclined towards the instructive dissection of vice. And both narratives, I argue, identify habit as the principle animating the actions of the antagonists (Foster’s glib, lecherous Peter Sanford and Brown’s enigmatic Carwin). Foster and Brown dramatize questions about the ethical content of habit in ways that echo Franklin and Rush, respectively: Foster’s narrative, like Franklin’s *Autobiography*, locates virtue and vice in the result of actions, no matter their motivation, whereas Brown’s narrative dramatizes the Rushian epistemological quandaries of distinguishing between actions actuated by pure mechanical habit and those “real” actions motivated by the heart.

My argument proceeds in four sections. The first situates late eighteenth-century ideas about habit’s ethical facets within earlier speculations about its role in bodily and mental processes. From Locke, whose associationism locates habit as the bridge between sensation and perception, I turn to David Hartley, whose neurology identifies it as a force altering the

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4 I view late eighteenth-century theories of habit as part of the larger contemporary turn from theological to naturalistic discourses in eighteenth-century America described by Eric Goldman (45). The turn, he argues, “reversed the theological tendency to translate physical and mental facts into abstract moral and spiritual terms,” yet I view habit in the 1790s as constituted in both naturalistic and moral terms.
miniscule “particles” suspended in the nervous fluid (I: 39). I then focus on the transference of these English ideas to the American context, resulting in the hope of harnessing habit for the social good of the fledgling republic. The transference (and transformation) of ideas from Europe to America is a major theme in the story this dissertation tells; American thinkers throughout the nineteenth century were keen to turn the transatlantic exchange of scientific ideas to their own social ends. The second section details the role habit plays in eighteenth-century theories of crime and vice, which, I argue, owe as much to Hartley’s conception of habit as Locke’s. I show that these theories conceptualized habitual crime as contagious; preventing crime, then, meant controlling the spread of “bad” habits such as drinking and patronizing prostitutes. The third section argues that novels allowed Americans of the early republic to encounter and work through contemporary ethical debates about habit. Through a reading of The Coquette, I demonstrate that fiction provides readers with the experience of habitual vice,


providing an inoculation of sorts against it.\(^7\) I argue that Foster’s narrative, providing a broadly consequentialist view of habit, dramatizes the infectiousness of habit without excusing actions actuated by it. The fourth section examines the epistemological challenges posed by habitual virtue and vice. I argue that Wieland’s narrative maze—its own habit of sundering the “connections between motive and act, intent and consequences”—recreates for readers the treacherous epistemological adventure of ascribing blame to habitual offenders. Narrative, I conclude, renders the abstractions of Locke, Rush, and others concrete and available to the reading public.

**A Settled Habit**

“Moral virtue,” writes Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, is “the result of habit” (26). He believed that the nourishment of virtues through habit would allow individuals to flourish ethically and live fulfilled, admirable lives. This is to say that enlisting habit as an ally to moral improvement was by no means a concept exclusive to the late eighteenth century. But what Aristotle understood as habit and what thinkers of the eighteenth century understood as habit are different concepts: to understand eighteenth-century conceptions of habit solely as offshoots or reflections of classical conceptions is to extricate them from the historical and cultural concerns from which they arose. In what follows I argue that Franklin and Rush’s notion of habit emerged

\(^7\) Novel-reading was by no means universally regarded as a tool for moral improvement in the early republic. Thomas Jefferson was famously anxious about novels: “A great obstacle to good education,” he writes Nathaniel Burwell Monticello in March 1818, “is the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed. When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. Nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy, and nothing so bedecked comes amiss. The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life” (166). But he viewed novels based on true events (of which *The Coquette* is an example) differently: “This mass of trash, however, is not without some distinction; some few modelling their narratives, although fictitious, on the incidents of real life, have been able to make them interesting and useful vehicles of sound morality” (91).
from a specific nexus of historical and cultural circumstances that positioned it as a way to understand automatic action, the links among discrete mental processes, and the nature of the relationship between mind and body. “If,” philosophers Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson write, “Cartesianism trades in a dualist metaphysics that regards mind and body, spirit and matter as distinct substances, and then assumes this basic dualism and its accounts of thought, passion, behavior, and action,” then “the philosophy of habit encourages us to conceive these phenomena as occurring between mind and body, spirit and matter” (4). It is therefore “indispensable for constructing a nondualist metaphysics along with new accounts of subjectivity” (4). In the context of the early American republic, habit provided a new account of subjectivity in which an individual was understood to be both plastic (able to form habits) and rigid (formed by habits).

The thought of John Locke, the late seventeenth-century philosopher and education theorist whose ideas about habit’s role in binding discrete mental processes reverberates through the eighteenth century, created the epistemic conditions under which such new forms of subjectivity could coalesce. He identifies habit as guiding the “trains of motions in the animal spirits”:

Custom settles habits of thinking in the understanding, as well as of determining in the will, and of motions in the body: all which seems to be but trains of motions in the animal spirits, which, once set a going, continue in the same steps they have been used to; which, by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy, and as it were natural. As far as we can comprehend thinking, thus ideas seem to be produced in our minds; or, if they are not, this may serve to explain their following one another in an habitual train, when once they are put into their track, as well as it does to explain such motions of the body. (Essay 275)

English physician Thomas Willis, one of Locke’s teachers at Oxford, theorized animal spirits (from anima, or soul) in De anime brutorum (1672) as minute substances that course through the body and allow the brain to communicate with the muscles (Yolton 163-64). The animal spirits travel via the nerves, structures that in Willis’s account (derived from that of Descartes) resemble
hollow tubes, and produce voluntary motion. For Locke, the motions of the animal spirits are what “settles" habits of thought, willful determination, and motion in the human body (275). He figures the nervous system as like a series of footpaths, some of which become worn and more easily traversable with use. And much as such footpaths only become more devoid of grass and more packed as more feed tread upon them, once a neural path begins to be worn it only becomes more so until the connection it forms seems “natural” (275).

Locke’s idea that an individual’s habits become part of his or her nature, echoed in his pedagogical treatise Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693)—habits are “woven into the very principles of [a person’s] nature”—suggests that he views one’s nature as impressible by experience (44). Jay Fliegelman writes that a Lockean habit is thus “more than a reasoned act or an emotional response”: it is “second nature” (181). Habits, he writes, for Locke “more than formed man, it renatured him” (181). Part of habit’s property of shaping human nature is forming associative connections between discrete mental processes, making it so that one necessarily leads to another. In this way distinct processes such as sensation and judgment become so habitually aligned that one perceives them as the same phenomenon:

This, in many cases by a settled habit in things, whereof we have frequent experience, is performed so constantly and so quick, that we take that for the perception of our sensation which is an idea formed by our judgment; so that one, viz. that of sensation, serves only to excite the other, and is scarce taken notice of itself;—as a man who reads or hears with attention and understanding, takes little notice of the characters or sounds, but of the ideas that are excited in him by them. (83)

Habit causes sensation, defined by Locke as “an impression or motion, made in some part of the body, as produces some perception in the understanding” to seem the same as judgment, which confers meaning to perception (60). Thus the motions of the animal spirits that comprise certain sensations, in Locke’s psychology the most basic elements of mental experience, over time produce smooth paths to certain judgments, e.g. how one automatically perceives the symbol
“&” to mean the word “and” without having to take the time to consciously find it in one’s memory. We perceive the world as we do, then, partly because we are in the habit of perceiving it so. Further, we make certain connections, draw certain conclusions, and make certain judgments not because they have some transcendental existence to be perceived but because experience, impressed upon the body through habit, leads us to do so.

This psychology of habit provides an account of how voluntary actions and thoughts might become automatic, seemingly instinctual or part of a person’s nature, with repetition. Such actions also become pleasurable:

Habits have powerful charms, and put so strong attractions of easiness and pleasure into what we accustom ourselves to, that we cannot forbear to do, or at least be easy in the omission of, actions, which habitual practice has suited, and thereby recommends to us. Though this be very visible, and every one's experience shows him he can do so; yet it is a part in the conduct of men towards their happiness, neglected to a degree, that it will be possibly entertained as a paradox, if it be said, that men can make things or actions more or less pleasing to themselves; and thereby remedy that, to which one may justly impute a great deal of their wandering. Fashion and the common opinion having settled wrong notions, and education and custom ill habits, the just values of things are misplaced, and the palates of men corrupted. Pains should be taken to rectify these; and contrary habits change our pleasures, and give a relish to that which is necessary or conducive to our happiness. (181)

Locke’s view of habit as making actions not only easy and automatic but also pleasurable does not persist to any great degree today, but it is the cornerstone of his belief “that men can make things or actions more or less pleasing to themselves” through the conscious acquisition of habits. Such habits would not be the “ill habits” of “education and custom” but rather those that “give a relish to that which is necessary or conducive to our happiness” (181). In other words, he advocates undertaking programs of habit-building that will reshape the paths of the animal spirits and smooth the road to human happiness. His thought, then, combines a proto-physiological account of habit-formation with a hope of personal and public melioration—a combination that, I argue, makes possible the habit-forming schemes of Rush and Franklin.
This is not to argue that Rush, for example, at some point read *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and decided to found his ideas about habit on Locke’s. Rather, I argue that Locke’s ideas helped form a set of epistemic conditions or ways of understanding habit that made possible yet more ways of conceptualizing it, including Rush’s. Yet Locke, despite his apparent interest in the material aspects of the animal spirits, shies from making any investigation into a possible material basis for mental processes: “I shall not at present meddle,” he writes, “with the physical considerations of the mind … speculations which, however curious and entertaining,” he does not follow (1).

Because Locke’s philosophical works were so influential, his investigations into the links between habit and association were available to the speculations of others, among them English philosopher and physician David Hartley, whose neurophysiological theory of association influenced such thinkers as Benjamin Rush, Erasmus Darwin, and John Stuart Mill (Smith 123). Hartley’s 1749 *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* unifies human physiology (“his frame”), morality (“his duty”), and heavenly reward (“his expectations”). Historian of science Roy Porter writes that Hartley offers a materialistic associationism, for he “drew heavily upon Locke’s associationist empiricism, but whereas the wary Locke had avoided entangling himself with the material basis of thought, the younger man plunged in boldly, persuaded that the mysteries of the mind could be resolved by modern physical science” (180). “Drawing on associationism as an explanatory principle,” Porter writes, “Hartley went beyond Locke and set it upon physical foundations, that is, the anatomy of the nervous system and the physiology of ‘motions excited in the brain’” (180). Hartley’s system translated Locke’s associationism into the language and conceptual structures of mid-eighteenth-century neurophysiology, grounding such mental processes as perception and judgment in the brain and
Hartley’s “Doctrine of Vibrations and Association” combines “the Hints concerning the Performance of Sensation and Motion, which Sir Isaac Newton has given at the End of his *Principia*, and in the *Questions* annexed to his *Optics*” with “what Mr. Locke, and other ingenious Persons since his Time, have delivered concerning the Influence of Association over our Opinions and Affections” (5). “The Doctrine of Vibrations,” he writes, “may appear at first Sight to have no Connexion with that of Association; however, if these Doctrines be found in fact to contain the Laws of the Bodily and Mental Powers respectively, they must be related to each other, since the Body and Mind are” (6). The relationship between these doctrines in Hartley’s neurophysiology is that vibrations of the “infinitesimal medullary Particles” suspended in the ethereal “nervous fluid” of the brain and nerves underwrite corresponding chains of associations in the mind (72). He writes that “the Powers of generating Ideas, and raising them by Association, must also arise from corporeal Causes, and consequently admit of an Explication from the subtle Influences of the small Parts of Matter upon each other”: the movements of the “medullary Particles,” then, provide the basis for association.

Because the body’s nervous vibrations are responsible for mental associations, they are also responsible for habit and automatic action. Of automatic movements Hartley writes:

The *Motions* of the Body are of two kinds, *automatic* and *voluntary*. The *automatic* Motions are those which arise from the Mechanism of the Body in an evident manner. They are called *automatic*, from their Resemblance to the Motions of *Automata*, or Machines, whose Principle of Motion is within themselves. Of this kind are the Motions of the Heart, and peristaltic Motions of the Bowels. The *voluntary Motions* are those which arise from Ideas and Affections, and which therefore are referred to the Mind. (iii)

Hartley’s distinction between automatic and voluntary motion is simple and maintains a comfortable dualism of body and mind: automatic motions arise from the body, whereas voluntary motions arise from the mind. Yet his theory of habit, predicated upon his doctrines of
vibration and association, renders the seemingly firm boundary between automatic and voluntary permeable. Habit, he writes, alters the distances between and the “mutual actions” of “the small constituent particles” such that they vibrate differently, changing what was once a voluntary action into an automatic action (61). The medullary particles, once habituated to vibrate in certain ways given certain stimuli, become only ever more ready to do so again over time. This is why, Hartley explains, “the Sensations of the Ends of the Fingers give us so much more precise Information concerning the tangible Qualities of Bodies, than those of the Ends of the Toes,” despite the fingers and the toes having, to the naked eye, similar structures: because we more often touch objects with our fingers, they are habituated to communicating sensation to consciousness. Over time and with repetition, a habitual action may come to be triggered by “the most diminutive Sensations, Ideas, and Motions, such as the Mind scarce regards, or is conscious of; and which therefore it can scarce recollect the Moment after the Action is over” (106). And this stimulus-response process might happen so quickly that it escapes the notice of consciousness altogether and render the habitual action involuntary. “Hence it follows,” Hartley continues,” that the associative bonds forged by habit convert “voluntary [actions] into automatic” (106).

Habit, for Hartley, causes the body to take the mind’s place as the origin of action: “For these Actions, of which the Mind is scarce conscious, and which follow mechanically, as it were, some precedent diminutive Sensation, Idea, or Motion, and without any Effort of the Mind, are rather to be ascribed to the Body than the Mind” (106). Hartley’s physiology thus makes distinctions between voluntary and automatic, mind and body, only to suggest their impermanence. Benjamin Rush, as Donald J. D’Elia writes, found in Hartley’s work a naturalistic grounding for his own synthesis of philosophy, medicine, and politics: in Rush’s
unpublished lecture “On the Applications of Metaphysicks to Medicine,” written in 1794, he says that his own “system of physiology” is founded on *Observations on Man* (qtd. in D’Elia 110). He admires Hartley for “prov[ing] that all the exercises of the mind depend upon certain vibrations communicated to the brain through the medium of the nerves,” which he writes “greatly extended our knowledge of the moral & theological as well as the mental and physical worlds” (110). By joining the association of ideas and the eternal laws of motion, Rush believed, Hartley shined a light on the inner mechanisms of God’s most beloved creation. For the Philadelphian, D’Elia writes, Hartley was a “‘Newton’ of morality and religion, demonstrating for all to read and understand the certain, irreversible operations of the scientific law in producing good from evil in the natural world” (110).

The idea that association, education, and habit form one’s character and behavior made it possible to imagine a scientific approach to morality that leaders of the fledgling republic could use to create a virtuous nation. The new scientific view of morality, writes Francis Martin Dodsworth, “undermined the notion that sin was inherently wilful, or that it could be combated simply through exhortation or moral example,” the prevailing modes of moral education (86). “Instead,” he continues, “the role of government was to habituate people into correct behaviour through education and precise enforcement of the law”—Hartley’s physics of mind made it possible to imagine a naturalistic basis for such a government (86). It is within this context that Rush made the bold assertion that the citizens of the early republic might be made into “republican machines” able “to perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government of the state” (14-15). The very “wills of the people … must be fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unity in government” (15). In Rush’s vision, the mechanistic body politic, like any mechanistic body, functions best
when its constituent parts cause it to function with “regularity and unity” (15). And this vision is not, as it might seem to today’s sensibilities, an effort to rob the American people of their individuality and self-determination; rather, it is an attempt to understand, given his conception of human capabilities, how the new body politic might regulate itself.

In “On the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic,” the 1798 address in which Rush gives his thoughts on “republican machines,” he prescribes means by which young people might better learn the “religious, moral and political instructions” he argues schools should offer:

To obviate the inconveniences of their studious and sedentary mode of life, they should live upon a temperate diet, consisting chiefly of broths, milk and vegetables. The black broth of Sparta, and the barley broth of Scotland, have been alike celebrated for their beneficial effects upon the minds of young people. They should avoid tasting Spirituous liquors. They should also be accustomed occasionally to work with their hands, in the intervals of Study, and in the busy seasons of the year in the country. Moderate sleep, silence, occasional solitude and cleanliness, should be inculcated upon them, and the utmost advantage should be taken of a proper direction of those great principles in human conduct,—sensibility, habit, imitations, and association. (13)

For Rush, diet, occupation, and other ways of affecting the body are as important to his nation-building pedagogy as the subject matter of any curriculum could be. The conscious use of what he later calls “physical causes”—the mechanical forces that act upon the body—counteracts “the inconveniences of their studious and sedentary mode of life” (13). Here “regulate” and “regular” meet: the youth in Rush’s plan are required to habituate themselves to a regular, patterned, “temperate,” “moderate” way of living, guided by their teachers’ application “of those great principles in human conduct,—sensibility, habit, imitations, and association” (13). The influence of such a life, he continues, will affect not only the intellect but also “the principles and morals of young people” (13). Rush, then, understands the physical state of the human body as the horizon of both intellectual achievement and moral capability. To habituate the body—to discipline it—is to shape that horizon.
At the same time Rush was translating Hartley’s physiological theories of habit into pedagogical policy and moral theory, another iconic American thinker, Benjamin Franklin, was disseminating the results of his attempt to attain “moral perfection” through habit (66).8 As Betsy Erkkila writes, Franklin’s Autobiography (1793) narrates his life “as an on-going struggle between ‘Reason’ and ‘Inclination,’” or between his willpower and his subconscious impulses (718). He wished to “conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into” by breaking “contrary habits” that “took the advantage of inattention” and forming “good ones” so that he might gain a “steady, uniform rectitude of conduct” (presumably even in the circumstance of inattention) (66). Franklin thus, like Rush, viewed habit as a “general law in our natures” that concretizes repeated actions over time, be they “contrary” or “good.” This view, which he does more than perhaps anyone else to popularize, conceives of “human nature as malleable, manageable, and (perhaps) perfectible rather than fixed, fallen, and given” (Erkkila 727).

Famously, Franklin set out “to acquire the habitude” of thirteen virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility (67-68). Attaining each one, he theorized, would make the ones that follow it come more easily: temperance, for example, “tends to procure that coolness and clearness of head, which is so necessary … against the unremitting attraction of ancient habits,” making the acquisition of new ones easier (68). Habit makes the performance of any

8 As a young man, Franklin adopted dietary routines similar to those Rush would recommend for students. He adopted vegetarianism after reading Thomas Tryon’s The Way to Health (1691), which recommends a vegetarian diet (12). Therafter, he writes, he was a better scholar: “My brother and the rest going from the printing-house to their meals, I remained there alone, and, dispatching presently my light repast, which often was no more than a biscuit or a slice of bread, a handful of raisins or a tart from the pastry-cook’s, and a glass of water, had the rest of the time till their return for study, in which I made the greater progress, from that greater clearness of head and quicker apprehension which usually attend temperance in eating and drinking” (12-13).
given action easier over time until it becomes automatic; in Franklin’s system, acquiring a few habits makes acquiring the rest easier. Terrell writes that by founding his system of virtue on habit, he seeks to make “good” behavior “as far as possible a reflexive, often unthinking response” (122). In this scheme, virtue “does not consist in the conscious resistance of temptation” but in making that resistance automatic: if Rush hopes to leverage habit to create “republican machines,” Franklin hopes to show how the same tool might be used to create virtuous machines (122).

Or so it seems: Franklin freely admits that his project of moral improvement fails because “voyages and business abroad, with a multiplicity of affairs that interfered” interrupt it, although he saw the faults he tried to correct “diminish” because of his efforts (71). In the Autobiography he offers a portrait of Rushian physiological policy set into motion at the scale of the individual, a scale that turns out to be messier and more given to circumstance and interruption than Rush’s abstract physio-political theories admit. I bring up this difference not to adjudicate it but to illustrate how in the late eighteenth century habit (as a physiological theory of unconscious action, of politics, of self-determination, and of morality) was not a stable ontological structure waiting to be discovered and about which someone might be “right” but rather an unstable epistemological structure constituted by a set of beliefs about human nature current at the time. Locke, Hartley, Rush, and Franklin are some of the principle contributors to and disseminators of that structure, but its explanatory power led to it taking on forms other than those they intended.

**Bad Habits**

Most prominently, habit, precisely because it offers an explanation of how certain characteristics or behaviors become fixed in the malleable human nature assumed by most Enlightenment thinkers, offered a way to account for and punish crime. Social scientist Francis
Martin Dodsworth writes that habit “played a key role in legitimizing the various programmes for moral reform that were so prominent during the 18th century” because it made “reform and improvement” of criminals, previously thought incorrigible, “appear realistic possibilities” (86). It also became a way of understanding how individuals become criminals in the first place. Dodsworth credits the popularity of “criminal biographies” and autobiographies, or “published accounts of the lives and last speeches of condemned prisoners,” for popularizing the idea that the accretion of “bad” habits would, over time and with repetition, lead to a hardened criminality (87). “One of the most common patterns in these discourses,” he writes, “is for the individual to succumb to the temptation of vice, often initially by missing divine service on a Sunday, and being seduced by a prostitute, drink, or gambling” (87). Thereafter, the individual would progress to greater and greater vices (habitual behaviors becoming more automatic and gratifying over time), until he or she “ended their life at the gallows” (87). Virtue thus consisted, in part, of avoiding the first step, however minor, into vice.

William Hunting Howell argues that the psychology of Locke and Hartley inculcated in the early republic an imitative ethics by which imitating “proper exemplars” was “the surest route to ethical subjectivity”; this is why, he says, Franklin’s method of acquiring the habit of humility consists of imitating Jesus and Socrates (13, 23). And indeed, Franklin conceptualized virtue more as a craft to be perfected through practice and imitation than through good intentions. Terrell calls our attention to Franklin’s 1760 letter to Henry Home Kames, in which he gives his thoughts on “the Science of Virtue”:

“Many people lead bad lives that would gladly lead good ones … [Virtue] is as properly an art as painting, navigation or architecture. If a man would be come a painter, navigator, or architect, it is not enough that he is advised to be one, that he is convinced by the arguments of his adviser, that it would be for his advantage to be one, and that he resolves to be one, but he must also be taught the principles of the art” (qtd. in Terrell 113).
For Franklin, an individual becomes morally righteous not because she decides to be that way or because someone else makes a strong argument for being that way but because she treats virtue as an “art” to be mastered. And just as Franklin learned the printer’s trade through his apprenticeship to his brother, an individual seeking virtue can find it by imitating the right people (Franklin, tongue perhaps in cheek, writes that he sought to imitate Jesus and Socrates). The reverse of this imitative virtue, made possible by habit, is imitative vice: Dodsworth points to the example of the British servant Harry Sims, who writes in his criminal autobiography that he “contracted a Habit of Idleness, Extravagance and Debauchery” from “a Number of the Ladies of the Town” (88). If imitative virtue might be thought of as a set of behaviors unrooted in any particular intention, character, or state of mind and communicated between persons through imitation, then imitative vice can be thought of as a sort of behavioral contagion spread by keeping the wrong company. Harry Sims “contracted” his habits the same way he might have contracted smallpox: through infelicitous contact.

English novelist and magistrate Henry Fielding, Dodsworth argues, makes the connection between habit and contagion clear: totally preventing bad habits, he says, is “as impossible in the Political Body as in the Natural. Vices and Diseases, with like physical Necessity, arise from certain Habits in both; and to restrain and palliate the evil Consequences, is all that lies within the Reach of Art” (qtd. in Dodsworth 91). “[B]ad Habits,” he writes later, “are as infectious by Example, as the Plague itself is by Contact” (qtd. in Dodsworth 91). So-called “bad” habits are conceived by Fielding as infections of the body politic, “restrain[ed] and palliate[d]” (but, as Franklin learns, not eradicated) only by through the force of moral reform. Rush, in a 1787 essay titled “Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society,” originally read at a meeting of the Society for Promoting Political Enquiries held at Franklin’s
home, recommends that public punishments such as the stocks should be abolished in favor of punishments “accommodated to the constitutions and tempers of the criminals,” including their habits (154). “[T]he utmost possible advantages,” he writes, “should be taken of the laws of the association of ideas, of habit, and of imitation” (154-55). His vision of criminal punishment treats rehabilitation as something like a modern medical treatment plan, which seeks to use medicine’s tools for affecting the body to turn an individual’s particular ailments into a more standard, less individuated state of health. Crime and punishment, for Rush, is less about cleansing souls than it is about restoring bodies’ virtuous equanimity.

The story of habit in the eighteenth century suggests that although few Americans in the earliest years of the republic were likely to understand themselves as “republican machines” set into automatic motion by the needs of the nation, many could well have understood themselves as having unconscious, habitual tendencies. Tracing habit’s transformation from the conceptual linchpin of Locke’s associationism in the beginning of the eighteenth century into a core concept in politics and morality in the second half of the century points up how scientific theories of human nature, once broadly disseminated, lend themselves to speculative answers to enduring questions about vice and virtue: are “bad” people inherently so? How do “good” people become that way? Who can be considered accountable for his or her actions? Habit adds to these questions three key ideas: 1. that the body’s habitual processes affect behavior; 2. that habit offers ways to mold human nature; 3. that habits are contagious. These ideas, like habit generally, dissociate action from choice and the will. In other words, habit makes moral life less a matter of conscious deliberation and more a matter of making virtuous actions automatic.

Neglecting the emerging moral theories and practices sparked by habit in all its eighteenth-century permutations means missing the ways that Americans of the early republic
attempted to turn “general law[s] in our natures” to the good of the nation and the individual. It also means missing how habit provided entirely new ways to think of accountability: take for example Franklin, who wishes to locate virtue at once in the free choosing of good actions and in their automation. Yet Hartley’s work suggests that habit, as a bodily principle that calcifies voluntary actions into involuntary actions, calls hard-and-fast distinctions between voluntary and involuntary into question; in doing so, it makes ascribing praise or blame an epistemologically fraught venture. In the following section of this chapter, I argue that literature provided Americans of the early republic ways to navigate that venture’s terrain.

A Reformed Rake

The discourses about habit that I have discussed were held mostly through the rarified media of philosophical works (Locke), physiological treatises (Hartley), and political speeches and essays (Rush). Franklin’s popular Autobiography was more accessible to the general public, as were the criminal biographies and autobiographies that disseminated the idea of contagious vice. These genres created new ways of thinking about accountability in the abstract, but they did not provide means through which individuals might engage the new moral situations they made possible. This is to say that they tend not to offer ways to understand how habit plays out at the scale of the individual; they do not show, for instance, how an idea such as contagious vice works in a given moral situation. Take the case of a man who, after some unhappy, even accidental contact with vice, acquires habits that lead to ever-greater depravities and, eventually, the dissolution of his character. Rush would recommend that after the man inevitably commits a crime and is imprisoned, the authorities should do what they can to instill good habits in him so that he might eventually return to society reformed. But what of the man whose habits incline him not to crime but to immorality?
That task, I argue, falls to literature and, here, to the seduction novel specifically. Theorist Georg Lukács writes that “the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life,” including fine-textured representations of psychological phenomena such as moral systems (60). Mikhail Bakhtin writes that the novel as a genre consists of “the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality,” the stuff of everyday life and its possibilities (39). “At its core,” he continues, “lay personal experience and free creative imagination” (39). This is to say that novels provide individuals ways to experience imaginative realities that are still within the realm of possibility. By depicting characters’ cognitive states as they react to a given set of circumstances, novels offer readers the opportunity to observe minds in action: cognitive literary theorist Lisa Zunshine argues that fiction engages readers’ theory of mind, or the “ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (6). And by observing how fictional minds react to moral circumstances that could very well happen in “real” life, readers gain the opportunity to experience entirely plausible moral situations from a safe remove. That is part of why literary scholar Blakey Vermeule writes that fictional characters “are the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented”: their minds and interactions make novels rich sites for one to think through and exercise moral judgment (xii). In a novel one finds a sort of moral laboratory, or a delineated space within which the results of a given moral hypothetical can be worked out. The reader differs from the scientist in that she has no need to be or seem objective: she can freely agree with, dispute, explain away, apply, or

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ignore the laboratory’s results. Similarly, novels differ from laboratories in that they might arrange the particulars of a moral hypothetical—the villain in the hypothetical is made even more villainous—so that a predetermined moral response is more likely.

Such is the goal of the seduction novel, an immensely popular genre in the United States during the last decades of the eighteenth century. Novels such as William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy; or, The Triumph of Nature* (1789), Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), and Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797) that dissect seduction and its consequences were bestsellers well into the nineteenth century. The broadest intent of these novels was to educate readers, particularly young women, about the dangers of seduction: in each narrative, a young woman is seduced, after which she loses her reputation, her ties to family and friends, and her life. Their plots, melodramatic to twenty-first-century sensibilities, are structured in ways that represent seduction as a process comprised of a series of discrete events, every one of which an opportunity for the reader to exercise judgment or to ask herself what she would do in the situation.

In what follows I analyze *The Coquette* as an exemplar of its genre and as a literary work in dialogue with a historically and culturally particular set of moral theories, some of which are made visible to a current-day reader by the above analysis of habit. I argue that the novel inoculates readers against the contagion of vice by allowing them to experience its consequences in the realm of imagination. The novel depicts “bad” habits as maladies of the body politic, contagiously spreading across the web of social relations. I claim that Foster avoids the ethical morass of assessing responsibility for habitual actions by articulating a consequentialist approach to responsibility that judges actions, regardless of their intent or ultimate motivation, by their

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10 I do not mean to imply that scientists are necessarily objective but rather to illustrate a contrast between objectivity and the epistemologically fraught adventure of everyday moral judgment.
results. This argument itself cuts through the critical reception of *The Coquette*, which, as Daniel Diez Couch writes, is divided into two camps: “one argues for the novel’s insistence on female autonomy, while the other argues for Foster’s codification of conservative gender relations” (684). The former sees Eliza Wharton’s retreat from her friends and family after she conceives a child with rake Peter Sanford as a laudable act of resistance, whereas the latter sees the novel as affirming patriarchal oppression by “punishing” Wharton for her sexuality (684). “Both these approaches,” Couch argues, “share the mistake of historical anachronism, since they seek to locate Eliza at the opening of a long, later history of gender relations and feminism” (684).

Instead of celebrating the novel as a tale of feminist liberation or condemning it for not being sufficiently transgressive, I read it as a sort of experimental theater of moral situations in which readers are enabled by its epistolary structure to observe the plot from a variety of viewpoints.

Reading the novel this way, I argue, situates it within a historical context in which fiction’s powers of representation were taken seriously as a mode of moral experience.

*The Coquette* begins with a letter from Eliza Wharton to her friend Lucy Freeman narrating the death of Wharton’s fiancé, Mr. Haley. Haley, Wharton writes, was selected by her parents to marry her, and although he “was a man of worth” and “a man of real and substantial merit,” she feels no attraction to him: “no one acquainted with the disparity of our tempers and dispositions, our views and designs,” she writes, “can suppose my heart much engaged in the alliance” (15). She is soon to leave her parents’ home for that of family friends, where she hopes to “cultivate” the “disposition of mind … Calm, placid, and serene; thoughtful of my duty, and

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benevolent to all around me” consequent to Haley’s death (16). Earlier in the letter, she expresses her hopes that “if I have wisdom and prudence to follow his advice and example; if his prayers for my temporal and eternal welfare be heard and answered, I shall be happy indeed” (15). A reader in 1797 reading a novel titled The Coquette would know these hopes are ironic and that Wharton does not have the “wisdom and prudence” necessary for her “temporal and eternal welfare”: in other words, the reader knows that Wharton will experience a decline. The causes of that decline are the stuff of the narrative.

The novel does not provide Freeman’s reply to the first letter; instead, it moves immediately to Wharton’s next letter to her, in which she describes the return of her “accustomed vivacity” (16). Her mother misreads this change of temperament as a stoic effort to present a happy face despite her “heavy bereavement”; “Poor woman! She little thinks that my heart was untouched; and when that is unaffected, other sentiments and passions make but a transient impression” (16). Freeman’s reply to her first letter must have admonished her to make good on her resolution to cultivate a “disposition of mind” more “placid,” for she calls it a “moral lecture”; in response, she assures her friend that “your monitorial lessons and advice shall be attended to. I believe I shall never again resume those airs; which you term coquettish” (16).

Yet soon, against the repeated warnings of her friends and family, Wharton spurns the kind, honorable, unexciting minister Mr. Boyer in favor of the dissipated but more interesting Peter Sanford, conceives, gives birth, goes insane, and dies. Sanford, in a letter to his friend Charles Deighton, records her didactic plea to the young women of America:

May my unhappy story serve as a beacon to warn the American fair of the dangerous tendency and destructive consequences of associating with men of your character, of destroying their time, and risking their reputation by the practice of coquetry and its attendant follies! But for these, I might have been honorably connected; and capable, at this moment, of diffusing and receiving happiness! But for your arts, I might have remained a blessing to society, as well as the delight and comfort of my friends! (100)
In this passage, Wharton makes the most obvious moral argument of the narrative clear: consider this story a warning against “the practice of coquetry and its attendant follies.” She characterizes the consequences of those follies as a blow not only to herself but to her society: she is no longer “honorially connected” and so has lost her place as a node in her social network “diffusing” happiness as she receives it. By emphasizing the social repercussions of Wharton’s seduction, *The Coquette* foregrounds the Rushian linking of personal and national ethics.

Two of Wharton’s closest connections, her best friend Lucy Sumner (Lucy Freeman after she marries) and her mother Mrs. Wharton, likewise situate personal behavior within a wider societal context. Sumner, trying to warn her friend away from Sanford, cautions her that she does not act in a social vacuum: “Slight not the opinion of the world. We are dependent beings; and while the smallest traces of virtuous sensibility remain, we must feel the force of that dependence, in a greater or less degree” (86). And Mrs. Wharton:

> With regard to its being a dependent situation [marriage], what one is not so? Are we not all links in the great chain of society, some more, some less important, but each upheld by others, throughout the confederated whole? … Let us conduct uprightly and justly; with propriety and steadiness; not servilely cringing for favor, nor arrogantly claiming more attention and respect than our due; let us bear with fortitude the providential and unavoidable evils of life, and we shall spend our days with respectability and contentment at least. (35)

For Sumner and Mrs. Wharton, mutual dependence forges “links in the great chain of society.” Eliza Wharton’s following her own desires, in this view, is detrimental not only to herself but to those close to her: they rend the fabric of her community. Both advisors also use the Rushian ethical language of mechanical force (“we must feel the force of that dependence”; “each upheld by others, throughout the confederated whole”) and regulation (“steadiness”). Describing their ethical language as mechanical is not to say that it is simple or not cognitively rich; rather, these characters’ epistemological horizons are such that they understand the ethical claims an
individual’s community places on her in the terms made available by materialist psychology. In *The Coquette*, to be mechanical is not to be a mindless automaton—the mind’s mechanisms are what allow cognition to exist. When Boyer first feels affection for Wharton, he writes his friend Mr. Selby that “With all the boasted fortitude and resolution of our sex, we are but mere machines. Let love once pervade our breasts, and its object may mold us into any form that pleases her fancy, or even caprice” (54). To be a machine in this novel is not to be rigid but to be moldable.

Yet that molding, in Boyer’s case, is in the hands of his beloved—just as Sumner and Mrs. Wharton emphasize the social roots of ethical well-being, Boyer embraces his sense of dependence on Eliza Wharton. They model Rush’s great machine of government, comprised of “republican machines” acting codependently and in concert. Peter Sanford, Wharton’s seducer, is also changeable, but he does so at his own discretion: “I am a mere Proteus,” he writes in a letter to his friend Charles Deighton, “and can assume any shape that will best answer my purpose” (25). He is a rake, acting independently of the social networks that connect the other characters, changing himself not for another’s sake but for his own. Freeman dissects the danger he poses to her friend, who thinks that “a reformed rake makes the best husband”:

I believe that rakes very seldom *do* reform, while their fortunes and constitutions enable them to pursue their licentious pleasures. But even allowing this to happen, can a woman of refinement and delicacy enjoy the society of a man, whose mind has been corrupted, whose taste has been vitiated, and who has contracted a depravity both of sentiment and manners, which no degree of repentance can wholly efface? Besides, of true love they are absolutely incapable. Their passions have been too much hackneyed to admit so pure a flame. You cannot anticipate sincere and lasting respect from them. They have been so long accustomed to the company of those of our sex, who observe no esteem; that the greatest dignity and purity of character can never excite it in their breasts. They are naturally prone to jealousy. Habituated to an intercourse with the baser part of the sex, they level the whole, and seldom believe any to be incorruptible. (44)

Although Sanford thinks himself a “mere Proteus,” Freeman characterizes his dissipated life as
altering his character for the worse: in her view, he is not a Proteus in charge of his shape but, like all humans, a person molded by his experiences into a creature of habit, for better or worse. Her use of the present perfect tense when she writes that his “mind has been corrupted” and that his “taste has been vitiated” as opposed to “his mind is corrupt” or “his taste is vitiated” emphasizes that Sanford’s past experiences affect his present: “no degree of repentance can wholly efface” his degeneracy. She maintains the present perfect tense as she delineates how he and other rakes “have been so long accustomed” to women “who observe no esteem” that “their passions have been too much hackneyed,” or overused, to partake of “true love.” He is “[h]abituated to an intercourse with the baser part of the sex” and so views all women as liable to seduction. Even if he were to reform, which Freeman thinks unlikely, his depravities will have taken their toll. Echoing contemporary theories of habitual criminality, she situates Sanford within a timeline of past experiences, especially probable contact with prostitutes, that shaped him into a rake. In her view, rakes are not born but formed through a specific process of moral degeneration.

That Freeman views Sanford’s actions as habitual, “contracted” from others, does not mean that she thinks him unaccountable for his actions (44). In another letter to Wharton warning her of Sanford, she writes that his “vicious habits, and abandoned character … have more pernicious effects on society, than the perpetrations of the robber and the assassin” (47). Robbers and assassins “are rigidly punished by the laws of the land,” but the seducer, “the assassin of honor, the wretch, who breaks the peace of families … is caressed” by both men and women (47). If more women avoided seducers, she writes, it would be good for “the public weal, and to their personal respectability”: again, Freeman sees Wharton’s personal moral choices as connected not only to the well-being of all women but to that of the public generally (47).
Similarly, she views Sanford’s responsibility for his actions not in terms of whether he freely wills them or some other psychological metric but in terms of how they reverberate through the social chain. This is to say that she is less concerned with Sanford himself than with how his habits infect the body politic.

Wharton’s education, taste, and sensibility, her friends think, should make her resistant to the effects of such habits because they ought to make her unlikely to converse with rakes. Throughout the novel, her friends express their surprise that she would “associate” with Sanford, given that she is a “lady of delicacy” (21). In her final letter of the novel, Sumner (now Freeman) writes that “the American fair” should learn from Wharton’s story “to reject with disdain every insinuation derogatory to their true dignity and honor … To associate [with rakes], is to approve; to approve, is to be betrayed!” (105). Wharton’s misstep was spending time with Sanford and exposing herself to his contagious dissipation. In The Coquette, social association becomes psychological association at a larger scale: just as Locke and Hartley viewed psychological association as binding separate biological processes through repetition and experience, repeated association and the affective bonds it puts into place form a conduit for the consequences of Sanford’s habits to spread.

If bad habits can be “contracted” and spread through the tissue of the social body, then we can think of Foster’s novel as a sort of inoculation against vice. Jennifer Harris writes that late eighteenth-century American culture attempted to prevent women from even knowing about vice, so for Foster to “write knowingly of her heroine’s illicit acts was to make Foster, herself, vulnerable to charges of obscenity, impropriety, indelicacy, and the possession of knowledge that no respectable lady should, in fact, possess” (365). Yet Sumner’s hope that Wharton’s tale will teach “the American fair” not to associate with seducers suggests that a little knowledge of bad
habits’ consequences might protect young women in ways that conduct manuals and moral lectures cannot. The novel’s epistolary structure enables readers to observe the processes by which Sanford seduces Eliza, placing them among Wharton’s friends and family as spectators of her downfall. Foster thus places the reader in a position to draw moral conclusions, as Wharton’s friends do, thus building up their own habits of rake resistance.

Reading The Coquette not as part of a transcendent feminist history but as situated in the cultural and moral structures of its time shows it to be invested in working through contemporary theories about habitual vice. Rush and others portrayed criminal habits as potentially limiting individuals’ accountability, creating a sort of distributed agency in which a single act of vice might have roots in past actions and experiences or even those of others; Foster articulates a distributed justice that carries the logic of contracted habits forward by focusing not on the individuals who possess them but on their consequences. Rakes such as Sanford are carriers of bad habits and so should be shunned to isolate their contagion. This approach’s view of responsibility cuts through the ethical tangle created by habit by focusing on actions’ consequences rather than the mental states of those who perform them. As The Coquette demonstrates, the moral capabilities of seduction novels extend beyond sexual politics into pressing questions about one’s accountability for “contracted” habits.

The Empire of Mechanical and Habitual Impulses

In The Coquette, Sanford believes that he is the master of his own fate, able to become anything he wishes; it is Lucy Sumner who identifies him as a creature of habit and makes his habits, rather than his motives, the basis of her moral condemnation of him. The novel thus brings clarity to the ethical complexities consequent to habit’s explanatory power in the late eighteenth century. Yet Wieland, what Laura H. Korobkin calls “a highly forensic novel in which
every reader and every character is cast as a juror at whose ‘bar’ evidence of crime is presented for judgment,” dramatizes the epistemological and ethical veil habit throws over judgments of motive, plunging readers into a world devoid of moral clarity (723). Readers of the novel are cast as jurors, but the character they are most called to judge, Carwin, claims that his actions being habit-driven exculpates him of their consequences. Embracing habit’s automation of behavior, he attempts to make habit the basis of innocence rather than guilt. In the argument that follows I will not attempt to ascertain his guilt or innocence, as others have; rather, I will examine the ways that Brown translates the ethical quandaries habit poses into narrative form. In his preface to the novel, Brown writes that he “aims at the illustration of some important branches of the moral constitution of man” (3). If “the act of reading itself and the continuous judgments it simultaneously necessitates and problematizes” comprise the moral work of the novel, as Frank Shuffelton argues, and if Brown, like Foster and other contemporaries, views reading as an opportunity for moral training, then Wieland trains readers to realize the difficulty, complexity, and even impossibility of sure moral judgment in a world where the moral constitution might be misled and behavior plausibly attributed to mechanical habit.

Whereas The Coquette offers a straightforward, easily discernable moral (avoid rakes), and, as I have argued, provides in Lucy Freeman a way to exercise moral judgment without concern for motive, Wieland is, as many scholars have argued, decidedly equivocal about judgment. The arrival of Carwin, an enigmatic stranger and “biloquist” able to throw his voice

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and mimic others’, into the lives of Clara Wieland and her family begins a train of events that leads to their doom. Immediately prior to Carwin’s first appearance, Clara, her brother Theodore, his wife Catharine, and Catharine’s brother Henry Pleyel hear voices with no discernable source: Theodore and Pleyel on separate occasions hear what seems to be Catharine’s disembodied voice warning them of dangers ahead, and Clara faints in terror after hearing two unfamiliar voices in her closet arguing over whether to shoot or strangle her (66). After Carwin arrives as a guest in the house where Clara and her loved ones live, Theodore, fulfilling a lifelong desire for divine communion, obeys a voice that he takes to be that of God telling him to kill Catharine and their four children. At his trial, he mounts an antinomian defense of his actions:

Thou, Omnipotent and Holy! Thou knowest that my actions were conformable to thy will. I know not what is crime; what actions are evil in their ultimate and comprehensive tendency or what are good. Thy knowledge, as thy power, is unlimited, I have taken thee for my guide, and cannot err. To the arms of thy protection, I entrust my safety. In the wards of thy justice, I confide for my recompense. (201)

When asked if he has anything more to say, he states that his “motives have been truly stated,” which is true: it is his sincere belief that God, whose perfection trumps all human laws, instructed him to kill his family much as He instructed Abraham to kill Isaac (201). Earlier, Clara comments that because the “will is the tool of the understanding, which must fashion its conclusions on the notices of sense,” if one’s senses are deranged, “it is impossible to calculate the evils that may flow from the consequent deductions of the understanding”: the murders of Catharine and her children are “evils” that result from Theodore’s senses not aligning with reality (39).

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14 In the interest of clarity, I will refer to the Wielands by their first names.
The interpretation of Theodore’s murders as Brown’s commentary on the impossibility of a rational, democratically governed nation is influential enough to be the default reading for numerous scholars. This reading typically emphasizes the ease with which the senses, and therefore the understanding and will, might be misdirected, which they take as a warning of how easily minds are misled. But I wish to emphasize instead how the novel involves the reader in assessing the Wielands’ murders. *Wieland*, I argue, asks readers to make judgments about madness, intent, and habit not so that they might reach a certain conclusion about them but so that they experience how fraught reaching any conclusion about them might be. Frank Shuffelton writes that “Brown’s democratic lessons emerge not out of the content, the ‘moral,’ of his fiction but out of the act of reading itself and the continuous judgments it simultaneously necessitates and problematizes” (91). In Brown’s novel, any given moral judgment the reader might make—who is responsible for the deaths of Theodore’s wife and children, Carwin or Theodore?—is contested by the possibility of alternative judgments. Carwin might be responsible, for his fraudulent impersonation of the Almighty is the first step to Theodore’s religious madness. Yet careful readers will note that Theodore was disposed to religious mania even before Carwin’s arrival. Assessing the case in an evidence-oriented, lawyerly fashion so that a definitive, “true” judgment might be reached is a foregone conclusion, for Clara’s mental state and narration grow more disturbed and unreliable as the novel progresses and as she struggles to form her own moral judgments. “In *Wieland*,” Shuffelton argues, “not only is the judgment of the protagonists disorganized, but the understanding of the nature of crime itself is called into question, as is ultimately its very location, whether in the heart of the so-called criminal or in those of the

witnesses and potential judges” (102). And habit, as the naturalistic foundation of Carwin’s
defense, lies at the heart of the novel’s ethical morass.

Carwin never faces a jury for his actions, although Theodore does, and is found guilty; instead, he makes his case to Clara personally (it is “at your bar am I willing to appear,” he says) (225). His account of the events leading to the murder of Theodore’s family follows the pattern of a contemporary criminal autobiography: as a youth “[u]nfortified by principle, subjected to poverty, stimulated by headlong passions,” he “cultivated this gift” of biloquism (227). He left America for Europe (and does not say why), and met an unnamed man “who called himself my friend” but who “betrayed” him into using his talent for “acts which cannot be justified, though they are susceptible of apology” (227). Like the criminal autobiographer, he attributes his first step down the wide road to Hell to contact with someone who led him to it. Upon his return to America, he took up walking in the lands around Clara’s home and spent time in the “Temple,” a nearby neoclassical structure where the Wielands gather for recreation. One evening in the Temple, Carwin heard Theodore approaching; because of “the awkwardness attending such an interview,” he threw his voice to lead him elsewhere (228). A single use of his talent, he says, triggered the habit of deception and meddling he acquired in Europe: “A thousand times had I vowed never again to employ the dangerous talent which I possessed; but such was the force of habit and the influence of present convenience, that I used this method of arresting his progress” (228). After the first triggering of the habit, it recurred more frequently and with greater force. When Carwin overheard Theodore and Pleyel debating a move to Europe, he found it “irresistible” to “interfere”: his “inveterate habits” led him to impersonate Catharine, in the aural guise of whom he convinced the men to remain in America (229).
This “second lapse into error,” the second habitual ill-use of his talent, “made my recovery more difficult. I cannot convey to you an adequate idea of the kind of gratification which I derived from these exploits; yet I meditated nothing. My views were bounded to the passing moment, and commonly suggested by the momentary exigence” (229). At this stage of his narrative, he fully embodies the aspect of the habitual criminal, whose habits of vice only become more pleasurable and automatic over time. He portrays himself as almost entirely reflexive, unreflective, incapable of intention or deliberation, and bound by the stimulus-response of habit. In doing so, he attempts to distance himself from accountability: “I intended no ill,” he says, “but my folly, indirectly and remotely, may have caused” the murders (223-24). By emphasizing how habitual regimes of vice overwhelm intent, he hopes to convince Clara to dissociate him from his actions. He implicitly posits a “real,” internal Carwin (a Cartesian homunculus) whose control over behavior is contested by habit. Why punish me, the “real” Carwin, he seems to ask, for what I did not will to happen? His excuses are made plausible by habit’s force as an explanatory principle for automatic action and criminality. The novel, then, enlists the reader in joining Clara’s attempt to adjudicate not only the particular case of Theodore’s family’s murders but also the general case of whether moral responsibility rests on intent or consequences. And in the absence of a Lucy Freeman to provide counsel, the reader, like Clara, must come to her own conclusions.

The remainder of Carwin’s confessions depicts him almost like a sleepwalker or automaton: “involuntarily and by a mechanical impulse,” he convinces Pleyel that Clara, who loves him, desires another; “subjected to the empire of mechanical and habitual impulses,” “actuated” by habit, he frightens Clara with voices outside her door (239-40, 244). In Rush’s

16 The phrase “empire of habit” appears in Locke’s *On the Conduct of the Understanding*.
view, an “empire of mechanical and habitual impulses” would function as efficiently and harmoniously as clockwork, properly guided; in *Wieland*, such an empire is a chaotic tyranny of whim and compulsion. When Carwin learns of Catharine’s death, he wonders if he had not “rashly set in motion a machine, over whose progress I had no controul, and which experience had shewn me was infinite in power?” (246). This question at first seems like a confession, despite its explicit dissociation of Carwin from the “machine” of his biloquism, but he insists that “You tell me an horrid tale of Wieland being led to the destruction of his wife and children, by some mysterious agent. You charge me with the guilt of this agency; but I repeat that the amount of my guilt has been truly stated. The perpetrator of Catharine's death was unknown to me till now; nay, it is still unknown to me” (246).

Clara is unmoved by Carwin’s claims, for despite his “attempts to give an human explanation of these phantasms,” she concludes that he is “the agent; his tale is a lie, and his nature devilish … now do I behold the author of all our calamities!” (246-47). Immediately after this declaration, Theodore appears with the intent of murdering Clara, who he believes deserves punishment for “eternally questioning the behests of thy Maker,” or Carwin’s disembodied voice (248). Carwin retreats from the room and uses his ability to take the guise of God again: doing so, he forbids Theodore from killing his sister and commands him to “cease to cherish thy delusion” (262). Upon returning to rationality, Theodore kills himself (264). Clara, formerly certain of Carwin’s guilt in her family’s doom, suddenly “ceased to upbraid or accuse. His guilt was a point to which I was indifferent. Ruffian or devil, black as hell or bright as angels,

“Many men firmly embrace falsehood for truth, not only because they never thought otherwise, but also because, thus blinded as they have been from the beginning, they never could think otherwise, at least without a vigor of mind able to contest the empire of habit, and look into its own principles, a freedom which few men have the notion of in themselves, and fewer are allowed the practice of by others” (41)
thenceforth he was nothing to me. I was incapable of sparing a look or a thought from the ruin that was spread at my feet” (264-65). Her capacity to render moral judgment overwhelmed by grief, she ceases to care “from what source these disasters have flowed,” and Carwin moves to a remote farm in rural Pennsylvania (266). In the final paragraph of the novel, she challenges readers to do what she cannot: “I leave you to moralize on this tale” (278). Yet doing so, I have argued, is a task the novel makes nigh impossible: *Wieland*’s narrative makes attributing motive or intent to Carwin an unsure venture.

**Moralizing on the Tale**

Habit allowed Americans of the early republic to understand themselves simultaneously (and paradoxically, from a current-day perspective) as moldable and fixed, providing a pivot point between an eighteenth-century voluntarism emphasizing the disembodied mind and a nineteenth-century determinism emphasizing embodiment. An individual was malleable, free, and agential in that her very physical makeup was plastic and open to impression by experience; experience affected her physiology, altering, in Hartley’s neurophysiology, the vibrations of the infinitesimal particles suspended in her nervous fluid and enabling Rush’s edu-physiological speculations. Yet she was fixed, determined, and instinctual in that she was understood as habituated to and by her experiences and bound, in time, to her habits. In the context of this theory of human nature, to moralize—to interpret something as containing a moral lesson—is to take into account how habit encompasses not only malleability and fixedness but also similar “oppositional concepts like freedom/determination, natural/artificial, active/passive, cause/effect, spontaneity/instinct, and agent/patient” (Sparrow and Hutchinson 4-5). As it became more difficult to imagine others’ behaviors and one’s own as deliberate and intentional, it became more difficult to ascribe moral agency. In *The Coquette*, Lucy Freeman, who attempts to educate
her friend on the dangers Sanford poses, articulates a consequentialist approach to habitual vice yet finds that her moral lectures are of no avail. But Foster enacts the role of the Ruskin habit-forming pedagogue by creating a narrative that allows readers to experience and be affected by, albeit at a remove, the consequences of Eliza’s seduction. In *Wieland*, Brown dramatizes how habit’s dissociation of action and intent makes it difficult to make sure assessments of moral accountability. In both novels, literary form reveals the ethical worlds habit makes available. In turn, both novels show how narrative might intervene in the debates those worlds provoked.
CHAPTER TWO: BETWEEN VICE AND DISEASE: MORAL INSANITY, SHEPPARD LEE, AND THE ETHICS OF EMBODIMENT

“Who in the rainbow can draw the line where the violet tint ends and the orange tint begins? Distinctly we see the difference of the colors, but where exactly does the one first blendingly enter into the other? So with sanity and insanity. In pronounced cases there is no question about them. But in some supposed cases, in various degrees supposedly less pronounced, to draw the exact line of demarkation few will undertake tho’ for a fee some professional experts will.”
Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*

In the beginning decades of the nineteenth century, questions about impulsive, uncontrollable, or irrational behaviors that were at least partly answered by habit came to be addressed in the more specifically medical terms offered by so-called “alienists,” physicians specializing in diseases of the mind and brain. Such physicians increasingly found that they occupied an important role in Europe and the United States as arbiters of the boundary between virtue and vice. Led by Philippe Pinel’s pioneering research on insanity conducted as chief physician of Paris’s *Hospice de la Salpêtière*, physicians of the early nineteenth century began to understand insanity not as a permanent and total state of delirium (the prevailing view) but as encompassing a wide range of psychological afflictions. This shift broadened the medical definition of insanity dramatically. Newly categorized “partial” insanities such as Pinel’s *manie sans délire* (mania without delirium) posited that different faculties of mind might be disordered independently of one another. In Pinel’s *A Treatise on Insanity* (1801, translated into English 1806), he describes the disorder as follows:

> The powers of preception and imagination are frequently disturbed without any excitation of the passions.¹⁷ The functions of the understanding, on the other hand, are

¹⁷ A “preception” is a principle governing personal behavior.
often perfectly sound, while the man is driven by his passions to acts of turbulence and outrage. In many lunatics, a periodical or continued delirium are united to extravagance and fury. (135)

The concept of partial insanity raised for physicians and laypersons alike questions about what insanity meant and whether one could be only partially insane (or only partially sane). It also raised questions about how to distinguish between insane persons and those who act in unusual or undesirable ways but are still sane. Writing on partial insanity, Benjamin Rush questions in Medical Inquiries and Observations, upon the Diseases of the Mind (1804) precisely “where the line should be drawn that divides free agency from necessity, and vice from disease” (360). James Cowles Prichard, a prominent English physician and early theorist of evolution, wonders in A Treatise on Insanity, and other Disorders Affecting the Mind (1835) where “eccentricity of character” ends and insanity begins (383). Neither physician offers a firm answer.

In this chapter I argue that physician, novelist, and playwright Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee (1836) harnesses the discourse of partial insanity to satirically emplot popular fears that opportunistic criminals might exploit new ways of understanding and diagnosing insanity to escape punishment. In doing so, I explore how fiction might intervene in debates about the ethical aspects of medical ideas by inviting the reader to assess them him- or herself in the absence of a character like Lucy Freeman to dispute the opportunist’s claims of inculpability. The chapter’s first section explores debates surrounding a type of partial insanity termed “moral derangement” by Rush and “moral insanity” by Prichard that is characterized by a disorder of one’s temperament, feelings, and habits that does not affect the intellect. A morally insane person might have no difficulty conducting herself rationally in most areas of daily life but still find herself irresistibly driven to steal even when she knows she will be caught. Moral insanity proved to be the most controversial of the partial insanities because it bears directly on ethics and
the law: it challenged the prevailing view that a rational person is, by virtue of being rational, fully responsible both morally and legally.

In the chapter’s second section, I situate moral insanity and the debates it inspired within contemporary and controversial efforts on the part of phrenologists to advance biological theories of the mind that, like moral insanity, constituted a break with prevailing views on moral responsibility. Drawing this connection means demonstrating the ways that moral insanity corresponds with phrenologists’ locating the brain as the organ of the mind. It also means tracing the biological aspects of moral insanity, which proved central to the contentiousness of the debates surrounding it. Describing moral insanity as a disorder of the body means locating morality itself within the body. Thus, I argue, moral insanity participates in the broader early nineteenth-century shift, most commonly associated with phrenological and physiological discourses, from metaphysical and spiritual to physical views of the mind-body relationship. As I will discuss, Rush and Prichard show themselves to be more than aware of how sensitive an issue locating the causes of moral insanity within the body could prove: just as they decline to find the line demarking vice from disease, they decline to state definitively whether they view moral insanity as rooted in the body. Instead, they diplomatically and circumspectly hint at its somatic causes.

Two sets of responses answered moral insanity’s shifting of the boundaries between vice and disease. One set viewed the shift as a laudable move towards justice and mercy. The Professor of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.’s Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny (1861), best sums up the sentiment: “moral insanity … has done more to make men charitable and soften legal and theological barbarism more than any one doctrine I can think of since the message of peace and good-will to men” (227). For those like the Professor, moral insanity meant an end to
punishing those who act as they do because they are sick, not because they are malicious. The other set of responses viewed moral insanity as the first step on a slippery slope to the abolition of moral responsibility. Is murder not so atrocious and unthinkable an act that any murderer might be considered insane? If rationality is no guarantee of moral agency, what is?

In the chapter’s third section I argue that Sheppard Lee dramatizes the latter set of responses. Specifically, I argue that the novel offers a wide-ranging satire of the ethical ramifications of early nineteenth-century medical theories of embodiment. After Sheppard Lee, a languid young Jerseyman, strikes his foot with a mattock while digging for buried treasure in the woods, his spirit is expelled from his body (47). The disembodied Lee wanders until he comes across the corpse of Squire Higginson, a local brewer, and to his surprise, he finds that he can house his spirit in the dead man’s body and reanimate it (52). He discovers that Higginson’s body carries within it an innate character that changes his natural affections and instincts. Drawing on the language of embodiment, he says that the new body’s power over his thought and behavior is such that he becomes a completely different person. Over the course of the novel, ________

18 Other scholars have attended to American literature’s treatment of moral insanity, typically in connection to Edgar Allan Poe. John Cleman, writing on Poe’s engagement with the insanity defense in his fiction, notes that concurrent “asylum reform and the increased popularity of what was known as ‘moral treatment’ of the insane certainly contributed to the public perception that to be acquitted on the basis of insanity was to avoid punishment” (625) Likewise, Dan Shen argues that Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” should be read with moral insanity’s implications for the insanity defense in mind: as Shen points out, the narrator of the tale “retains his rationality in ‘calmly’ telling the story, premeditating the crime, cunningly carrying it out and trying to hide it; but on the other hand, he displays ‘dreadful’ nervousness, the lack of a rational motive for killing” (340).

19 It would be reasonable to ask why Bird wrote a novel instead of a medical text to protest medicine’s new relationship to morality. One reason is that Bird quit practicing medicine a few years before publishing Sheppard Lee; afterwards, he worked full-time on plays and novels. Another reason is that writing a novel allows Bird to stage the ethical repercussions of embodiment and to show their possible effects. Writing a medical text would limit what he could say about the subject.
he inhabits the bodies of I. D. Dawkins, a Philadelphian dandy; Abram Skinner, a rapacious moneylender; Zachariah Longstraw, a Quaker, and Tom, a Virginian slave, reporting throughout that his original identity is overwhelmed by the physiological makeup of their bodies. That the bodies Lee inhabits are dead, with the consciousness in each presumably extinguished, emphasizes the degree to which he views the body’s materiality itself as determinative: “much of the evil and good of man’s nature,” he states, “arise from causes and influences purely physical” (140).

I detail the ways that Lee’s views of embodiment dovetail with those of contemporary science and medicine before turning to how Lee’s use of the language of embodiment comically subverts itself in a way that coheres into a sharp satire of how such language may be turned towards eliminating moral responsibility. That Bird appears to endorse that which, I argue, he subverts is a feature of the novel’s satiric mode: much as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) enthusiastically recommends cooking and eating Irish children as a way of drawing attention to their plight, Bird’s novel hyperbolically asserts contemporary science and medicine’s claims about embodiment to comically shine a light on their ethical pitfalls.

Another comedic form at play in *Sheppard Lee*, is one that was, like satire, popular in the early republic: blackface minstrelsy. The fourth section of this chapter argues that the novel poses a powerful if submerged counter-narrative to Lee’s tale by weaving his discourse of medical, material embodiment with that of blackface minstrelsy during Lee’s troubling tenure in the body of Tom, a Virginia slave. Blackface minstrelsy provides the representational foundation of Lee’s portrayal of racial blackness, for Lee narrates his account of the consciousness and behavior of Tom and his fellow slaves through blackface minstrel music and imagery drawn from such popular songs as “Jump Jim Crow” (1832) and “Clare de Kitchen” (1832). I draw on
recent scholarship on blackface minstrelsy to argue that minstrelsy both models and contradicts the circumstances of Lee’s embodiment within a black body. Minstrelsy models Lee’s embodiment in that both his embodiment and minstrelsy involve a white man appropriating dark skin towards staging racist, stereotyped depictions of racial blackness. Minstrelsy contradicts his embodiment, however, by indicating the ways that race is not bound to the physical body but is rather a product of social constraints and expectations.

This is not to say that minstrelsy is straightforwardly antiracist: far from it. Turning to minstrelsy means, as I will discuss, turning to its repertoire of racist stereotypes, and Bird does not shy from recirculating those stereotypes. At the same time, white performers’ appropriation of these stereotypes illuminates the racial malleability of the body, implying that bodies are not physiologically determinative of our selves but are rather sites at which selves can find intentional expression. In my reading, Lee is like a blackface minstrel who colors himself with Hunt’s polish. Though the changes he undergoes as he hops from body to body might at first appear such that Lee cannot properly be said to be Lee, upon closer inspection what lies beneath the skin has remained the same.

The stakes of this reading resonate at both the smaller scale of the novel itself and the larger scale of nineteenth-century American literary studies. At the smaller scale, Lee’s use of medical embodiment to deny his own free will and moral agency comes under suspicion. That denial positions him to exculpate himself for actions he lays at the doors of others’ bodies; in his view, the mind is so subject to bodily states that he cannot be held responsible for what he does while not inhabiting his own flesh (209). His argument thus makes a moral claim from physiological circumstance: bodies determine behavior, so he cannot be held responsible for
what bodies not his own make him do. Minstrel embodiment asks us to regard that argument skeptically.

At a larger scale, my reading offers an exploration of how attending to comedic forms prevalent in Bird’s time might add to contemporary texts’ interpretive opportunities. Satire and minstrelsy, the two comedic modes most at play in Sheppard Lee, are each predicated on imitation; satire imitates towards ironically lampooning the object of imitation, and minstrelsy imitates towards performing racial caricature. The novel, of course, is at its broadest level a tale of imitation, given that Lee’s habitation of others’ bodies allows Bird to depict life as a brewer, a dandy, or a slave while using Lee’s dissociated consciousness to provide the distance from those lives needed to lampoon them. In this chapter’s coda, I discuss how being attuned to these distinct yet intersecting imitative modes can give scholars new perspectives on nineteenth-century literature’s relationship to science and medicine.

A Perfectly Sound Judgment

Lee’s ability to jump from body to body gives him the opportunity to sample a range of identities and to live many lives. Unfortunately for those around him, his actions in others’ bodies often lead to disaster, chaos, and death. Some episodes, such as his turn as a philanderer in Dawkins’ body, are relatively harmless; others, such as his role in an unsuccessful and bloody slave rebellion in Tom’s, are catastrophic. Throughout, he repeatedly contends that he is blameless for what he says are the bodies’ actions, not his. In others’ bodies, he states, “I found myself invested with new feelings, passions, and propensities—as it were, with a new mind—and retaining so little of my original character, that I was perhaps only a little better able to judge

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20 Satire has existed since antiquity, but it was particularly prevalent in Bird’s time due in part to debates on the character of the country and to the rise of national political parties. A discussion of the challenges involved in historicizing satire can be found on page 27.
and reason on the actions performed in my new body, without being able to avoid them, even when sensible of their absurdity” (140). To change bodies is to change minds; therefore, we are not to blame Lee for what others’ “feelings, passion, and propensities” make him do.

Lee’s claim that altered affections and tendencies strip him of his moral agency reprises the claims of early nineteenth-century physicians researching moral insanity. We can trace moral insanity’s origins to Benjamin Rush’s attempt to define the ways that the physical world could impede what he calls the moral faculty. Rush made what historian of criminology Nicole Rafter writes is “one of the earliest scientific attempts to conceptualize crime and insanity as anything other than sin” in an address on “physical causes upon the moral faculty” given to the American Philosophical Society on February 27, 1786 (Rush 1; Rafter 21). In this speech, dedicated to Benjamin Franklin, Rush defines the moral faculty as “a capacity in the human mind of distinguishing and choosing good and evil; or, in other words, virtue and vice” (3). It is a separate faculty from the conscience in that it “is to the conscience, what taste is to the judgment, and sensation to perception” and is “quick in its operations, and like the sensitive plant, acts without reflection, while conscience follows with deliberate steps” (2). Rush remarks the similarity of the moral faculty to Francis Hutcheson’s moral sense, Adam Smith’s sympathy, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s moral instinct (3). However, he understands the moral faculty as distinct from its European counterparts in a crucial way: it is susceptible to influence from “physical causes,” including climate, diet, hunger, and disease (17-20). Turning to nervous disease’s effect on the moral faculty, he remarks that “preternatural irritability—sensibility—torpor—stupor or mobility of the nervous system” can “dispose [one] to vice”; it is futile, in such cases, “to attack these vices with lectures upon morality” (20). Instead, vices rooted in nervous disorders “are only to be cured by medicine”; treatment takes the place of punishment and illness.
that of blameworthiness (20). As Rush acknowledges, this heretofore unexplored conception of
morality traces “the shape, texture, and conditions of the human body” itself; the ability to
distinguish virtue from vice is thus construed as a psychophysiological process subject to disease
and the material world (30).

Rush was fully aware of the controversies his ideas could provoke: he compares himself
to Aeneas “when he was about to enter the gates of Avernus, but without a Sybil to instruct me in
the mysteries that are before me” (16). He writes that he is “aware, that in venturing upon this
subject, I step upon untrodden ground” (16). He identifies two objections to address, both of
which concern the ethical and theological effects of locating the moral faculty in the body and
both of which will reappear throughout this dissertation. The first objection is that “the doctrine
of the influence of physical causes upon the moral faculty” appears to “favor the opinion of the
materiality of the soul” (14; emphasis Rush’s). But, he writes, “I do not see that this doctrine
obliges us to decide upon the question of the nature of the soul, any more than the facts which
prove the influence of physical causes upon the memory—the imagination—or the judgment”
(14). He argues that it does not follow to make the immorality of the soul dependant on its
immateriality, for the soul’s immorality “depends upon the will of the Deity, and not upon the
supposed properties of spirit” (14; emphasis Rush’s). Indeed, he writes, matter is itself immortal:
though it might change form, “it requires the same Almighty hand to annihilate it, that it did to
create it” (14). Even if the soul were material (and Rush is careful not to attempt to answer the
question), it could still exist forever.

The second objection Rush addresses is the “idea of the necessary influence of physical
causes upon the freedom of the will” (15; emphasis Rush’s). The specific objection is that
physical causes upon the moral faculty would undermine moral agency. He responds that “I
believe in the prescience of the Deity, because I conceive this attribute to be inseparable from his
perfections; and I believe in the freedom of moral agency in man, because I conceive it to be
essential to his nature as a responsible being” (15). Rush’s endorsement of “the freedom of moral
agency in man” appears to undermine much of his speech, but his is a qualified affirmation:

In those cases where the moral faculty is deprived of its freedom, by involuntary diseases, I
conceive that man ceases as much to be a subject of moral government, as he does to be
a subject of civil government, when he is deprived by involuntary diseases, of the use of
his reason. (15)

The moral faculty is to moral responsibility, then, as reason is to legal responsibility. If that is so,
then just as the loss of reason’s freedom is legally exculpatory, the loss of the moral faculty’s
freedom is morally exculpatory. The key phrase in the above passage is “involuntary diseases”:
one does not choose to be sick, so one cannot be held responsible for the consequences of
sickness. If one of those consequences is a disordering of the moral faculty, the sick person
should not be considered morally agential at all. Rush thus seems to reject the idea of moral
agency by degrees: one is either within or without the sphere of “moral government.”

Though Rush appears to view “moral government” in either/or terms, he understands
disorders of the moral faculty as occurring within degrees. He corrects “the defects of the
nosological writers, by naming the partial or weakened action of the moral faculty,
MICRONOMIA. The total absence of this faculty, I shall call ANOMIA” (16). The physical
causes that could provoke micronomia or anomia include climate, diet, alcohol, extreme hunger,
disease, idleness, excessive sleep, pain, cleanliness, solitude, silence, music, “the eloquence of
the pulpit,” odors, airs (dephlogisticated air generates cheerfulness), and certain medicines (17-
27). Despite this expansive range of causes, Rush does not mention whether some are more

21 Whether this means that Rush saw even the most minor of disorders to the moral faculty as
exculpatory is unclear.
influential than others or by which degrees they might affect the moral faculty. He is far more interested in using medicine as a tool to reduce moral disease in the same manner as physicians reduced the incidence and mortality of smallpox and tetanus: doing so would create a more virtuous republic (36).

Rush followed up on his speech decades later in 1804, when he published *Medical Inquiries and Observations, upon the Diseases of the Mind*. The book remained influential throughout the early nineteenth century and was republished in five editions, the last of which was published in 1835. In it Rush largely repeats his thoughts of 1786, and he terms the condition arising from a disordered moral faculty “moral derangement” (357). He also remains as wary as ever of fully embracing the ethical and theological implications of his ideas. He declines to say to what degree the morally deranged “should be considered as responsible to human or divine laws for their actions, and where the line should be drawn that divides free agency from necessity, and vice from disease,” but he maintains that “it will be readily admitted that such persons are, in a pre-eminent degree, objects of compassion” (357). It is best, he writes, to treat moral derangement as a disease to be cured with “confinement, labour, simple diet, cleanliness, and affectionate treatment, as means of reformation and forgiveness” rather than a vice to be punished (365).

Rush’s conception of moral derangement is one in that explicitly concerns one’s ability to distinguish right from wrong. For physician and nosologist Philippe Pinel, trained in Lockean empiricism rather than the Scottish faculty psychology that underpins Rush’s thinking, the mind does not contain an innate moral faculty. This difference in philosophical commitments resulted in the two men approaching the same nosological gap (mental derangement that does not affect the intellect) from different angles. In *A Treatise on Insanity* (1801), Pinel writes:
We may very justly admire the writings of Mr. Locke, without admitting his authority upon subjects not necessarily connected with his enquiries. On resuming at Bicêtre my researches into this disorder [mania without delirium], I thought, with the above author, that it was inseparable from delirium; and, I was not a little surprized to find many maniacs who at no period gave evidence of any lesion of the understanding, but who were under the dominion of instinctive and abstract fury, as if the active faculties alone sustained the injury. (150)

The phrase “active faculties” indicates Pinel’s philosophical commitments to Locke, who distinguished between passive (sensory) and active (mental) sources of ideas. Pinel proposing that the active faculties sustain maniacal fury thus means that the disorder arises from a deranged mind rather than any external source. He breaks with Locke, though, in identifying instances of mania without accompanying delirium. To illustrate the concept he gives the example of a young man whose “weak and indulgent mother” supported him “in the gratification of every caprice and passion, of which an untutored and violent temper was susceptible” (151). He became totally unable to control his temper so that any “instance of opposition or resistance, roused him to acts of fury”: he instantly killed any animal that “offended him” and incited fistfights whenever in the company of others (151). Despite these issues, he “possessed a perfectly sound judgment” when not angered and “proved himself fully competent to the management of his estate” (151). Eventually, though, he pushed a woman into a well in a fit of rage and was permanently committed to Bicêtre (152).

The case of the maniacally furious young man illustrates an important difference between Rush and Pinel. Whereas Rush focuses on the derangement of one’s ability to tell right from wrong, Pinel focuses on the derangement of one’s emotions. Despite Rush’s international reputation, his ethical approach was largely ignored by subsequent psychiatrists, while Pinel’s manie sans délire found durability through its affirmation in the acclaimed work of his pupil Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol. Esquirol’s 1805 Des Passions considérées comme causes,
symptômes et moyens curatifs de l’aliénation mentale situates manie sans délire under the broader umbrella of “affective monomania,” or insanity that disorders the affections only. That Esquirol follows Pinel’s rather than Rush’s thinking in his definition of the disorder is significant because of the debt James Cowles Prichard, who coined the term “moral insanity,” owes to his work. Prichard was a personal friend of Esquirol’s and even dedicated his groundbreaking *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835) to him. Despite his admiration of Esquirol, Prichard does not follow him in describing moral insanity as an affliction of the emotions only: he also views it as disordereding one’s moral dispositions.\(^{22}\)

Prichard’s use of the term “moral insanity” to describe a derangement of the emotions has resulted in confusion for those who came after him. Historian of science Jan Verplaetse writes that though it is clear that he views moral insanity as an insanity of the emotions, it is uncertain whether he saw it “also as an impairment of the moral sense or the moral faculty” (195). Because he trained in medicine in Edinburgh, Verplaetse notes, he would have been familiar with both options (195). He adds that historians of science are “divided on this subject”: one camp argues that moral insanity deranges the moral sense or moral faculty, and the other argues that it deranges the emotions (195). But I find in Prichard’s writing no reason to assume that he viewed moral insanity in either/or terms:

[Moral insanity is] madness consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination. (6)

For Prichard, moral insanity is as much a disorder of one’s “moral dispositions” as it is of one’s “affections.” He illustrates the disorder with the case of a young man held in the York Lunatic

\(^{22}\) This is not to say that Prichard endorses Rush’s thinking. Rush understands the moral sense in a specific way, i.e. as one’s instinctive ability to tell right from wrong. Prichard’s view of moral dispositions is more general and refers to a one’s moral habits, constitution, or character.
Asylum, “a youth of good temper, cheerful and active, having no defect of understanding that could be discovered, even after long observation,” who nonetheless “is continually prone to commit every kind of mischief in his power, and not long ago escaped from his confinement and made his way to Bishopthorpe Palace, with the design to set it on fire” (22). As the example makes clear, Prichard does not simply twine Rush’s and Pinel’s descriptions of moral insanity: one’s “moral dispositions,” or one’s general moral commitments, are distinct from the moral faculty, having more in common with what Rush calls the conscience; a “morbid perversion” of the affections is less specific than Pinel’s manie sans délire, a state of uncontrollable fury that leaves the intellect intact. Rather, for Prichard moral insanity is a more general “morbid perversion of the affections and moral feelings” (22).

I suspect that Prichard’s generality has contributed a great deal to the confusion of those who have come after him. His description of the disorder, quoted above, reflects the degree to which he views the affected mental processes as interrelated. A more detailed description makes the connections clear:

[Moral insanity is] a form of mental derangement in which the intellectual faculties appear to have sustained little or no injury, while the disorder is manifested principally or alone, in the state of the feelings, temper, or habits. In cases of this description the moral and active principles of the mind are strangely perverted and depraved; the power of self-government is lost or greatly impaired; and the individual is found to be incapable, not of talking or reasoning upon any subject proposed to him, for this he will often do with great shrewdness and volubility, but of conducting himself with decency and propriety in the business of life (4).

For Prichard, deranged “feelings, temper, or habits” leads to a significant lessening of one’s ability to govern oneself and to an inability to go about daily life “with decency and propriety.” The terms “self-government, “decency,” and “propriety,” encumbered as they are with moral weight, indicate the degree to which Prichard views damaged affections as afflicting one’s moral life. And later he describes moral insanity as “disorder affecting merely the moral character, the
propensities, habits, temper, and feelings, without involving any notable lesion of the understanding,” placing the moral character first among the afflicted mental phenomena (246). The moral affliction Prichard describes is thus not Rush’s conception of a disorder of one’s ability to know right from wrong but rather a disorder of one’s moral character, or one’s personal moral commitments.

Though Prichard does not necessarily agree with Rush’s work on what he calls moral derangement—he favorably refers to the Philadelphian many times on the subject of bloodletting but does not mention insanity—both physicians show concern for those who suffer from moral insanity only to a certain degree. Prichard notes that such persons might display “a singular, wayward, and eccentric character” that causes others to “entertain doubts as to their entire sanity” (12). Occasionally the disorder comes on so slowly that it appears to be “an exaltation and increase of peculiarities, which were always more or less natural and habitual” (13). The afflicted might arouse “apprehension and solicitude” to their loved ones as they pursue “wild projects and speculations” that can lead to “absolute ruin” (13). Prichard here teeters on pathologizing mere oddness: if everyone who chased get-rich-quick schemes or obsessed over niche projects were insane, the bar for sanity would be set too high to be useful. However, he is careful to add (though much later in his treatise) that the exact line between “insanity and eccentricity of character is very difficult to discover, and I shall not attempt to sift this matter to the bottom on the present occasion (383). He is, though, “fully persuaded” that some cases of “extreme oddity or eccentricity” are “cases of madness” (383).

Prichard thus solidifies a set of medical concerns that had percolated since the beginning of the century: partial insanity, which afflicts either the intellect or the affections but not both; what deranged affections mean for moral agency; and whether one can be insane by degrees.
Like Rush, he recognizes that his research into these concerns, specifically his thinking on how disease affects moral agency, differs from contemporary legal standards of *non compos mentis* and exculpatory insanity. He includes in his *Treatise* a chapter on “unsoundness of mind in relation to jurisprudence” that offers some proposed changes to the law (352). Prichard defines “mental unsoundness” as “a disordered of defective state of the mind, impeding in such a manner the exercise of its faculties as to render an individual incapable of performing correctly the duties of life, and of maintaining over himself those restraints with are necessary for the intercourse of society” (352). Consequently, it “impairs or destroys moral responsibility” (352). Prichard writes that addressing the jurisprudence of such knotty questions as “what constitutes soundness and unsoundness of mind?” and whether insanity can exist in degrees is the role of “both lawyers and physicians” (352). Physicians, “as observers of nature,” study “the phenomena displayed by the human constitution under disease, and from the relations of these phenomena to deduce such results as common sense, aided by the habit of reflecting on similar subjects, may enable them satisfactorily to establish” (353-53). From those conclusions, “legal regulations are to be constructed” (353). Here, Prichard demonstrates the extent to which he views the law’s role in medical jurisprudence as subservient to medicine: laws “must be made to accommodate themselves” to physicians’ views on the limits of moral agency” (353).

Prichard is well aware that moral insanity’s challenge to the idea of rationality as the sole guarantor of moral agency would also challenge the English courts, which in 1835 recognized only “idiots, who are properly *idioae ex nativitate*, idiots from birth, and lunatics or madmen, styles ‘*non compotes mentis*’” (355). “This indeed,” he writes, “would reduce the classes of incompetent persons recognized by law within very narrow limits indeed” (355). For the courts to recognize cases of moral insanity as exculpatory would be a radical broadening of those
limits; thus, whether “such an affection really exists or not is very important in connexion with medical jurisprudence” (380). But convincing the English legal system of the existence of moral insanity would be an uphill battle, for “no such disorder has been recognized in the English courts of judicature, or even admitted by medical writers in England” (380). He writes that English physicians and lawmakers only recognize cases of insanity insofar as they consist of cases of “mental illusion” (380).23 Moral insanity, though, consists precisely of a disorder of the affections with no accompanying delusions or damage to the intellect. Regardless of what Prichard sees as England’s sluggishness to adapt to new research on mental disease, he remains “fully persuaded that the time is not far distant when the existence of mental disorder unaccompanied by illusion or any lesion whatsoever of intellect, will be generally recognized” (382).

Prichard’s vision did not prove completely true. In the 1843 trial of Daniel M’Naghten, who attempted to murder British Prime Minister Robert Peel, M’Naghten’s defense counsel extensively deployed the work of American physician Isaac Ray, whose 1838 Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity championed Prichard’s arguments the jurisprudence of moral insanity (Diamond 651). The trial resulted in M’Naghten’s acquittal on grounds of insanity, a controversial decision that prompted a group of judges to construct a test for exculpatory insanity that juries would thenceforth be instructed to apply: “To establish a defence [sic] on the grounds of insanity, it must be clearly proved that, at the time of the committing of the act, the party was

23 Prichard explains how the courts view insanity as necessarily including delusion with a passage from the “Report on the judgement [sic] in Dew v. Clarke and Clarke, Delivered by the Right Hon. Sir J. Nicholl. Lond. 1826”: “… the true criterion is—where there is delusion of mind there is insanity; that is, when persons believe things to exist which exist only, or at least in that degree exist only in their own imagination, and of the non-existence of which neither argument nor proof can convince them, they are of unsound mind; or, as one of the counsel accurately expressed it, ‘it is only the belief of facts which no rational person would have believed, that is insane delusion.’” (380)
labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or if he did know it, that he did not know that he was doing what was wrong” (qtd in Maeder 33). This test makes two key revisions to standing practice: first, insanity need no longer be permanent to be exculpatory; second, the degree of derangement need no longer be total but only to the degree that the sufferer could not tell right from wrong. Though this shift, known as the M’Naghten rules, instituted many changes advocated by physicians, it did not recognize affective derangement as cause for acquittal on the basis of insanity. That the M’Naghten rules were adopted in both Britain and the United States suggests the degree to which courts on both sides of the Atlantic sought a middle ground between new and old ways of viewing insanity.

The courts did not incorporate moral insanity into the M’Naghten reforms because the disorder was, as legal historian Janet A. Tighe writes, a site of both “interest” and “bitter conflict” among physicians and jurists (231). The popular association of insanity with a deranged intellect, she argues, was too powerful to easily overcome (231). And laypersons viewed moral insanity as “shield[ing] people who were evil rather than ill,” a concern that Rush and Prichard both anticipated but proved unable to persuasively counter (231). By midcentury, moral insanity gave way to degeneration, which, as I will discuss in depth in Chapter 4, blamed psychological and social problems such as insanity and criminality on heredity (Rafter, “Horse-Slasher” 995).

Before midcentury, though, moral insanity was the most well-known and controversial part of a broader “concern with what effect the expansion of medical definitions of insanity would have on traditional legal and moral concepts like responsibility” (Tighe 232). Moral insanity’s notoriety in popular, judicial, and medical contexts makes the similarities between moral insanity and Sheppard Lee’s description of his mind as it flits from body to body more
than merely coincidental. Further, Bird’s having Lee deny responsibility for his actions because
his new feelings and temperament strip him of moral agency echoes moral insanity’s core
question and controversy: to what extent does it requires rethinking moral responsibility? In the
next section I demonstrate the ways that moral insanity participates in broader early nineteenth-
century shifts from “theories stressing volition and absolute moral responsibility to theories
which emphasized some form of ‘scientific’ determinism,” which were viewed as “threat[s] to
traditional institutions and seemingly related values such as free will, moral culpability, and just
retribution.” Specifically, I argue that the moral insanity controversy and the more general shift
from vice to disease in the early nineteenth century are best understood in context with
phrenology, the early nineteenth century’s popular science of the brain.

The Limitations of Human Responsibility

In A Treatise on Insanity, Prichard writes that the “conditions of the mind and of the
nervous system connected with moral insanity, is a subject involved in deep obscurity” (112). As
he was well aware, the question of whether moral insanity corresponds to debility of the brain or
nervous system is ethically significant. To ground moral insanity in the body is to take a step
towards grounding one’s affections and moral temperament in the body rather than in the mind
or soul. Prichard does not at first offer a firm opinion on the body’s connection to moral insanity.
The disease is so “difficult to explain,” he writes, that some “might be tempted to doubt its
existence as a primary affection” at all, regardless of the nature of its causes (112). He appeals to
his own “experience and observations” as proof of moral insanity’s existence, but he
acknowledges that evidence of an accompanying physical debility—a tattered corpus callosum, a
lesioned frontal lobe—would be stronger proof. He notes that François-Joseph-Victor Broussais
locates the physical cause of moral insanity in “irritation of the trisplanchnic apparatus, and
especially in that of the stomach, acting on the brain” (112). Prichard agrees that irritation of the digestive system also irritates one’s temper, but not to the extent that it could render one murderous (114). He would seem, then, to reject the body as a cause of moral insanity.

Later, in a chapter on the pathology of insanity, Prichard changes tack. He states as before that of all mental disorders, moral insanity is most difficult to trace to “the presence of disease in the brain” (246). He notes that it is impossible to prove that “the passions and propensities are seated in the brain,” and that to do so is to ally oneself with the view that the brain is the “instrument in all the manifestations of mind or the attributes of the soul” (246). But here he goes further than previously: despite his qualms, he writes that it is “probable that moral insanity depends, in some instances at least, on disease of the brain” (246). Again, though, he says nothing conclusive on the subject.

In what follows I tie Prichard’s deliberations on the physical causes of moral insanity to phrenology, a discipline that forms the scientific and cultural backdrop for the moral insanity controversy. Phrenology offered a biological explanation for mental phenomena that was popular and influential in both Europe and the United States throughout the early nineteenth century. Though many today dismiss phrenology as a pseudoscience at odds with “real,” professionalized science, the discipline has its roots in neuroanatomy and was taken seriously in its time. It is also an important precursor to a variety of developments in modern neurology.24

Franz Joseph Gall, an Austrian neuroanatomist and the father of phrenology, published Discours d'ouverture, lu par

24 Edwin Clarke and J.S. Jacyna write that Gall was actually the first to insist that the mind is situated within the brain, “to us a very obvious conclusion,” and later note that Gall’s concept of brain localization is “generally accepted” today (4, 213). Mary Brazier argues that Gall “may be regarded as a pioneer in emphasizing the importance of the grey matter for intellectual processes” (“Electrical Activity” 199). Robert Young argues that the founders of modern psychology owe a “direct debt” to Gall (250). Denis Leigh agrees, writing that Gall’s map of the human skull “was an early forerunner of the magnificent work on localization of nervous functions which still continues” (245).
M. le Dr Gall à la première séance de son cours public sur la physiologie du cerveau, a speech made during a public course on the physiology of the head, in 1808. In it he explains that discrete mental faculties are located within specific areas of the brain and that the head’s physiological structure can offer clues to the strengths and weaknesses of these mental faculties in any given person. This connection between cranial morphology and brain size is phrenology’s foundational concept.25 He also lays out some of the implications he thinks his ideas will have for philosophy.

In the speech, he says:

Si j’arrive maintenant à l’étude de l’homme lui-même, dont l’organisation est si prodigieusement compliquée, et dont les variétés générales et individuelles sont infinies, je ne vois qu’un petit nombre de philosophes qui se soient attachés à l’analyse de l’homme Intellectuel. Mais ceux-ci ont trop souvent négligé les influences des causés physiques. En même-temps, la plupart des philosophes et des métaphysiciens se sont égarés dans des abstractions et dans des théories qui les éloignolent de la nature. (5)26

Gall demonstrates a preoccupation with a specifically materialistic conception of human nature and cognition.27 Because he views humanity as part of “nature,” he echoes Rush in his attention

25 Some historians argue that only later phrenologists, not Gall, claimed that these mental organs were made legible from examining bumps on one’s head and that Gall believed that only individuals with extraordinarily large neural bumps would have bumps that are discernable (Clarke and Jacyna 223-4). However, he writes in the first volume of Sur les fonctions du cerveau…, his systematic treatise on the brain and skull, that “the form of the head or cranium should represent, in most cases, the form of the brain, and should suggest various means to ascertain the fundamental qualities and faculties, and the seat of their organs” (Gall, trans. Lewis, 55).

26 “To come now to the study of man himself, whose composition is so prodigiously complex, and whose general and individual varieties are infinite, I see a small number of philosophers who analyze Intellectual Man. However, they have often neglected the influence of physical forces [upon the mind]. At the same time, most philosophers and metaphysicians are lost in abstractions and theories that are removed from nature.”

27 George Combe, more widely read than Gall in America, would write in A System of Phrenology (1830) that contemporary charges of phrenology being materialistic were false,
to the ways that “causes physiques” affect the mind. Whereas Rush focuses on physical causes that are extrinsic to the affected person, e.g. climate and silence, Gall attends to the brain itself as the physical cause of all mental phenomena. Gall and those who followed him mapped different mental characteristics to specific areas of the brain. One’s abilities in such as areas as wit, perseverance, and poetic talent could be measured by feeling the bumps their correspondent neural locations pushed into the skull. So-called “lower propensities” such as “amativeness [lust], philoprogenitiveness [love of children], combativeness, secretiveness, and acquisitiveness,” thought to be shared with animals, were pertinent to vice (Fink 3).

Phrenology shares many of moral insanity’s assumptions about the mind, particularly the view that some mental functions can be disordered independently of others. Earlier I wrote that the Professor in Oliver Wendell Holmes’ Elsie Venner could summarize the views of those who thought moral insanity an avenue towards justice and mercy. I turn to him again to suggest the connection between moral insanity and phrenology:

The limitations of human responsibility have never been properly studied, unless it be by the phrenologists. You know from my lectures that I consider phrenology, as taught, a pseudo-science, and not a branch of positive knowledge; but, for all that, we owe it an immense debt. It has melted the world's conscience in its crucible, and cast it in a new mould, with features less like those of Moloch and more like those of humanity. If it has failed to demonstrate its system of special correspondences, it has proved that there are fixed relations between organization and mind and character. It has brought out that great doctrine of moral insanity, which has done more to make men charitable and soften legal and theological barbarism than any one doctrine that I can think of since the message of peace and good-will to men. (227)

It is not the case that moral insanity is a branch of phrenology, as the quoted passage can be read as suggesting. I understand the Professor as saying that phrenological ideas helped make it possible for moral insanity to exist as a theory of mental illness. The disorder can be traced to unless “the science is held to be a true interpretation of nature,” in which case phrenology would be a danger to theology for making the material nature of the universe known (412).
Rush’s and Pinel’s work, as I have explained, but phrenology provided a conception of the brain in which different mental abilities were located in discrete cerebral locations that were independent of each other. One location, or “mental organ,” as phrenologists termed it, might wilt while another flourishes. Phrenology thus shares the logic of partial insanity, in which one’s intellectual abilities might be afflicted without damage to one’s affections or vice versa.

Nicole Rafter writes that phrenology “made it easy to think of morality as a faculty or organ of the brain that could go bad while others parts operated normally”: thus, phrenology “nurtured the concept of moral insanity” by providing a popular and systematic way of thinking about the brain and mind (“Born Criminals” 76). The work of Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, Gall’s chief disciple and the man responsible for popularizing phrenology in the United States, illustrates how moral insanity and phrenology dovetail. In *A View on the Elementary Principles of Education*, first published in America in 1832, Spurzheim separates idiocy into “complete” idiocy, or a total and permanent debility of all mental functions, and “partial” idiocy, which affects one or several mental organs but not others (295). Like Prichard, he complains that the courts “are not yet convinced that there are various faculties of the mind, and that the manifestations of each power depend on a particular part of the brain; that one or several organs may be very active, while others are in a state of idiotism” (295). Such a state of partial idiotism explains, he writes, how a person might have strong “perceptive faculties” but no “powers of the moral will” (295). Again like Prichard, he references both Rush and Pinel in his description of what he calls “moral idiotism,” which deprives the afflicted of “sufficient moral motives,” rendering them unable to be considered as “accountable beings” (299). He differs from Prichard, though, in his full-throated support of the idea that the brain manifests the mind.
Despite Prichard’s reluctance to definitively locate moral insanity within the body, the disorder’s conceptual similarities to phrenology fueled the objections of those who viewed it as a materialist get-out-of-jail-free card for perfectly sane criminals. David Meredith Reese, a Philadelphian physician, complained as much in an 1858 report to the American Medical Association:

> It is only on the theory that the brain is congeries of organs, each of with has its appropriate function, and severally developing instinctive, moral and intellectual results; and on the still bolder hypothesis that the organs of each separate function may be arbitrarily mapped our, or designated by the science, that this conception of moral insanity could ever have been engendered. (qtd in Fink 68)

For Reese, whose 1838 *Humbugs of New-York* castigates phrenology as incompatible with Christianity, moral insanity is not a path towards enlightened mercy but rather the wide road to hell. The idea that one’s emotions and moral character might be deranged independently of one’s intellect was controversial by itself, but to locate what Spurzheim called “moral idiotism” in the body was to radically break from earlier metaphysical and theological theories of moral agency.

**Causes and Influences Purely Physical**

In *Sheppard Lee*, Lee takes full advantage of the shift to embodied models of the mind-body relationship. His actions lead to disaster, chaos, and death, but throughout the novel he defends himself to the reader. Some episodes, such as philandering in the body of I. D. Dawkins, the wannabe lothario, harm few other than himself; others, as his role in a slave rebellion as Tom demonstrates, are catastrophic. However, he repeatedly contends to the reader that he is blameless for what he says are the bodies’ actions, not his. After describing a dubious set of financial practices he keeps in Skinner’s body, he requests “the reader to remember that I had got into Abram Skinner’s body, and that the burden of my acts should be therefore laid upon his shoulders” (202). He places the moral burden of his actions, quite literally, on Skinner’s body.
Though he defends his actions to the reader by blaming others’ bodies, he learns early in the novel that other characters view, for example, Lee’s animation of Higginson as Higginson, not as Sheppard-Lee-in-Higginson’s-body. When Lee first inhabits Higginson’s body, he enjoys an afternoon of shooting woodfowl (Higginson’s favorite pastime) before his newfound corpulence and asthma tire him (60). He begins to walk to a nearby village for dinner but is stopped by a group of men accusing him of “having murdered Sheppard Lee—that is, my own identical self!” (61). They arrest him on the testimony of several neighbors who’d seen Higginson and Lee arguing politics in weeks past and who’d found a “freshly-dug grave” (the result of Lee’s treasure-hunting) and a bloody shoe (the result of Lee’s hitting his foot with his mattock) in the woods. Before the trial, he decides to inform the prosecutor of his transformation, “after which, I had no doubt, he would throw his bill of endictment into the fire” (64). The prosecutor responds to Lee’s story with disbelieving laughter, but works to release him from prison due to “the poor squire’s hallucination,” a total delusion of the sort expected by early nineteenth-century courts (67). Lee resolves to never again to attempt to “keep up the character of Sheppard Lee while in another man’s body” and works “to be Mr. John H. Higginson, and nobody else, for the future … for I did not like the idea of being clapped into a mad-house by my new friends” (69). Consequently, he addresses only the reader, whose credulity he demands in the novel’s opening pages, when he blames his actions on others’ bodies: “Doubt” his story, he says, “and be hanged” (8). He “writes for the world at large, which is neither philosophic nor skeptical; and the world will believe me; otherwise it is a less sensible world than I have all along supposed it to be” (8). Here, he seems to imply that a philosophical or skeptical reader will not believe his tale.
In this section I argue (as a philosophical if not a skeptical reader) that Bird writes Lee’s tale as a satire of the shift from vice to disease, a shift consequent to the emergence of embodied models of the mind-body relationship in the early nineteenth century. Scholars who have written about *Sheppard Lee* tend to understand Bird as in agreement with Lee’s embodied account of selfhood because that account dovetails with early nineteenth-century medical discourses on the mind-body relationship. Bird was, after all, a physician. But that reading overlooks the ways that Bird’s novel again and again makes embodiment itself a target of ridicule. Like his contemporary and admirer Edgar Allan Poe, the likely author of a favorable review of *Sheppard Lee* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Bird delights in lampooning all elements of Jacksonian life. Specifically, *Sheppard Lee* explores embodiment’s use as a vantage point from which to satirize contemporary politics and culture. Though critics are correct to view Lee as endorsing a strongly determinative version of embodiment, it does not follow to say the same of Bird, as

28 Samuel Otter offers an insightful reading of the ways Lee’s account of embodiment calls attention to the soul’s ties to “the material it inhabits”; this account, Otter asserts, “stem[s] from [Bird’s] medical training” (100, 95). Christopher Looby, similarly, writes in his introduction to the novel that its “physiognomic determinism … must owe a good deal to Bird’s experience as a medical doctor” (xvii). Recently, Jordan Alexander Stein and Justine Murison have read the novel as having a less straightforward relationship to Lee’s portrayal of embodiment. In particular, both attend to how Bird uses Lee’s materialist metaphysics of consciousness as a source of comedy. Stein notes that Lee’s philosophical materialism “erases the distinction between the willed or chosen, on the one hand, and the inevitable, on the other,” and that the novel plays Lee’s materialism “largely for comedy”; he does not, though, pursue in depth what comedic materialism might mean for how we read the novel (34). Instead, he argues that Lee’s materialism, because it downplays the power of individuals to control their bodies, is part of a wider critique of Jacksonian democracy, a political movement predicated upon the idea that the common man is fit to govern himself (36). Justine Murison’s brilliant analysis reads the novel as a satire of “the politics of physiological sympathy” that indicates the absurdity of sympathetically conflating one person with another (27).

29 In an anonymous review of Bird’s 1835 novel *The Hawks of Hawk-Hollow* written for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the anonymous critic (likely Poe), writes that he is “in the very first rank of American writers of fiction” (43). Of *Sheppard Lee* the critic writes that “the novel is an original in American Belles Lettres at least” (662).
many do; doing so conflates author and narrator. In a way, merging Bird with Lee parallels the determinative force Lee says bodies bring to bear on his personality. It is a dual monism: writer/character and Lee/body. But just as Bird is discrepant from his character, his character is discrepant from the bodies he inhabits. Far from endorsing what Lee says about embodiment, Bird finds it laughable.

In his work on African-American satire, Darryl Dickson-Carr notes that “defining satire can be a challenging and frequently confusing endeavor,” especially when one wishes to discuss a particular stitch in the fabric of a genre that spans millennia and continents (15). As in the case of African-American satire, though, Bird’s satire is marked by its situation within historically, politically, and philosophically specific circumstances, one of which is the shift from vice to disease already outlined. The novel’s satiric take on embodied approaches to moral agency extends to moral insanity. I argue that both Lee’s explanation of embodiment and contemporary definition of moral insanity describe a disruption in the normal functioning of one’s feelings, inclinations, and natural character without disordering one’s ability to think and know. Lee’s transmigrations into other bodies offer a narrative model of the medical symptoms of moral insanity: his native affections, propensities, and habits purportedly shift radically through the influence of others’ bodies, though he remains able to converse and reason “shrewdly” (Prichard 4). For Bird, whose medical training would have made him familiar with contemporary thinking on insanity, such a similarity is not incidental. Rather, the confluence of Lee’s exculpatory embodiment and the symptoms of moral insanity is a focal point of the novel’s satire of embodiment’s ethical repercussions.

Charles A. Knight writes that satire works by “imitat[ing] other genres” and discursive modes: it can thus sometimes be difficult to tell satire apart from the object of its derision (32).
In *Sheppard Lee*, that means that it is easy to confuse, as many critics have, jokes at the expense of embodiment for endorsements of it. In contrast to readings of *Sheppard Lee* that presume that Bird agrees with Lee’s portrait of embodiment because that portrait mirrors contemporary science, I argue that mirroring is more a satirical evaluation of what it doubles than a mimesis. As is true of other satirical works from Bird’s period, from Irving’s *A History of New-York* (1809) to Poe’s “Lionizing” (1835), he finds exaggeration a powerful satirical tool: he often has Lee make pronouncements on the body’s ascendancy over the mind that are bold enough to make Lee seem foolish.

The most sustained of Lee’s explanations of how his exotic form of embodiment works, a quasi-medical “morsel of metaphysics,” shows exaggeration’s satirical work in the novel (38).

He first briefly touches on morality, stating that:

much of the evil and good of man’s nature arise from causes and influences purely physical; that valour and ambition are as often caused by a bad stomach as ill-humour by bad teeth; that Socrates, in Bonaparte’s body, could scarcely have been Socrates, although the combination might have produced a Timoleon or Washington; and, finally, that those sages who labour to improve the moral nature of their species, will effect their purpose only when they have physically improved the stock. (140-141)

Lee’s comments reveal a complex picture, one that comically vexes the idea of morality—“the evil and good of man’s nature”—as having “purely physical” influences. He locates the roots of high-flown, desirous qualities such as valor and ambition within the decidedly more everyday “bad stomach.” That he does so comically exaggerates the body’s influence on the mind, especially compared to the more commonsense idea of “ill-humour” being caused by tooth pain (140). It is true, as Murison notes, that afflictions of the stomach were often thought to sympathetically affect the nervous system in Bird’s time; it is possible, then, Lee’s comment, 

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30 Contemporary moral reform societies such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice, or “those sages who labour to improve the moral nature of their species,” are also targets of Bird’s satire in this passage (141).
being representative of much contemporary medicine, ought to be taken as representative of Bird’s (24). However, the comic nature of the juxtaposition of valor and dyspepsia (especially when dyspepsia was thought more likely to lead to madness) indicates that Bird does not work within the logics of embodiment, as Lee seems to do, so much as he ridicules them.

Having addressed and satirically punctured the “purely physical” nature of moral character, Lee explains how the body and mind are joined: “Strong minds may be indeed operated upon without regard to bodily bias … but ordinary spirits lie in their bodies like water in sponges, diffused through every part, affected by the part’s affections, changed with its changes, and so intimately united with the fleshly matrix, that the mere cutting off of a leg, as I believe, will, in some cases, leave the spirit limping for life” (141). The pattern of comic juxtaposition previously established obtains in this passage: Lee’s describing the mind-body relationship by analogizing it to water in a sponge comically boils one of philosophy’s most hoary and intractable problems down to a household cleaning tool. In this reduction, the irreconcilability of the sponge’s banality and the physiology it purportedly explicates comically void the sponge as a serious and practicable model for the human body, which cuts at contemporary mechanistic explanations of consciousness.

Though both Justine Murison and Samuel Otter acknowledge the comedy of this passage in their influential readings of Sheppard Lee, they miss Bird’s satiric point. Murison rightly claims that though Lee’s ideas about embodiment are “humorously deflated,” he “expresses the standard view of the sympathetic body” (29). She goes on to identify the sponge as a workable metaphor for Bird to express sympathy as “a lounging and slothful exercise of ‘ordinary spirits,’” lazing in their bodies as water sits in a sponge (29). However, there is more to the sponge than its aptness for Bird’s critique of contemporary models of embodiment, including sympathy: it is the
humorousness of the sponge, not just its porosity, that animates Bird’s satirization of embodiment. Otter, in turn, argues that the passage, by switching the properties of matter and spirit—“[s]ponges acquire affections and spirits limp”—comically “deflate[s] notions that elevate or detach spirit from body” (101). I see quite the opposite: the humorousness of spiritual sponges and hobbling spirits ridicules not the separation of spirit and body but rather the “fleshly matrix” they analogize (141). Lee ends his explanation of embodiment by asserting that he is “not writing a dissertation on metaphysics, nor on morals either,” but what the metaphysics of consciousness means for morality is precisely what is at stake in the novel (141).

The mental changes Lee undergoes when he changes bodies mirrors the symptoms of moral insanity, which is a significant similarity given the disorder’s centrality to the shift from vice to disease. This is not to say that Sheppard Lee is “about” moral insanity but rather that it is in conversation with the broader moral issues moral insanity raised. Both Lee’s narration of his experiences in others’ bodies and moral insanity describe disruptions in the normal functioning of the feelings, inclinations, and natural character without disordering the ability to think and know. Compare Lee’s description of embodiment in others’ bodies—“I found myself invested with new feelings, passions, and propensities”—with Prichard’s definition of moral insanity:

[Moral insanity is] a form of mental derangement in which the intellectual faculties appear to have sustained little or no injury, while the disorder is manifested principally or alone, in the state of the feelings, temper, or habits. In cases of this description the moral and active principles of the mind are strangely perverted and depraved; the power of self-government is lost or greatly impaired; and the individual is found to be incapable, not of talking or reasoning upon any subject proposed to him, for this he will often do with great shrewdness and volubility, but of conducting himself with decency and propriety in the business of life. (352)

Lee’s transmigrations into other bodies offer a narrative model of the medical symptoms of moral insanity: his native affections, propensities, and habits purportedly shift so radically
through the influence of others’ bodies that he cannot govern himself, though he remains able to converse and think.

The similarities between Lee’s embodiment and moral insanity mean that Sheppard Lee dramatizes the aspects of moral insanity that led many to view it as the first step towards the elimination of moral responsibility. The novel reprises moral insanity’s challenges: how can you tell definitively whether another person’s strange or undesirable behavior is due to insanity? Are disordered affections exculpatory? What is the body’s role in moral agency? The stakes of these questions, as Prichard puts it, are that insanity “impairs or destroys moral responsibility” although eccentricity does not (352). Opponents of moral insanity insisted that a medicine-savvy criminal could easily pretend to have been temporarily and partially insane at the time of his or her crime and escape punishment. Antebellum jurists approached the problem by greatly increasing their reliance on medical testimony: they believed that physicians could help to separate the sane from the insane and thus demarcate the bounds of responsibility (Eigen 127).

Yet even for physicians, as the writings of Rush, Pinel, and Prichard make clear, moral insanity makes the visibility and permanence of such bounds a live question.

As previously discussed, the moral insanity controversy was fueled by concerns that it joined phrenology in locating the mind within the body. Doing so, it was feared, would mean that moral responsibility would be merely a matter of one’s bodily conditions. Sheppard Lee recapitulates this fear by having Lee insist throughout the novel that others’ bodies’ feelings and dispositions absolve him of moral responsibility. While in Skinner’s body, Lee directly asks the reader to blame his actions on his borrowed flesh:

A swearing gentleman once borrowed a Quaker’s great-coat, with a promise not to dishonour it by any profanity while it was on his back; upon returning it to his friend, he was demanded if he had kept his promise. ‘Yes,’ said the man of interjections, with one of the most emphatic; ‘but it has kept me lying all the time.’ I never heard anybody doubt
that the lying was the fault of the coat; and, in like manner, I hope that the reader will not hesitate to attribute all my actions, while in Abram Skinner’s body, to Abram Skinner’s body itself. (202)

This passage is satirical because of Bird’s method of offering a complex physiological analogy and moral argument by way of a simple object; it is also nonsensical in obvious ways, a house of cards Bird constructs specifically to showcase its points of failure. Lee identifies the coat as the cause of the “man of interjections” having to lie (202). However, it is not really the coat, but rather the swearing gentleman’s promise not to curse while wearing it, that “has kept [him] lying all the time” (202). The coat itself has no power. In this way, Lee’s parable of the coat analogizes not Lee’s portrait of exculpatory embodiment but rather Bird’s satiric twist on the same: both the coat and the human body in themselves have no intrinsic moral agency. The passage works satirically not only by redirecting the explanatory power of Lee’s analogy but also in its pointed indication of the logical fallacies he brings to bear in verifying it. His proof of the coat’s exculpatory power is that he “never heard anybody doubt that the lying was the fault of the coat”; this assertion is nonsensical because it shifts the burden of proof from him to whoever might care to ask others if they doubt that the coat exculpates the swearing gentleman. By such logic, he could just as easily make the dubious argument that “Socrates was a man because I have never heard anyone doubt that he was a man.”

Soon after, Lee asserts that “a man’s body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterward.” (209). What goes into the barrel loses whatever unique qualities it might have possessed. It becomes, simply, fish. Bird sets a pattern: Lee reaches for banal objects to explain how one’s mind is inflected by one’s body. The banality and simplicity of the objects Lee uses to analogize bodies—sponges, coats, fishy barrels—offer a satiric subversion of the mechanical language used in medicine to describe
embodiment. Much like Poe, who characterizes his narrator in “Loss of Breath” (1832) as unreliable through his florid, self-absorbed storytelling, Bird invites us not to take what Lee says about embodiment seriously. If satire is a type of ironic doubling, then to read Lee as true to his word risks mistaking the satiric point for what it doubles. In other words, we should take care not to miss the joke.

**The Popular Actor**

Lee’s vision of embodiment hinges on the idea that bodies shape one’s range of possible behaviors. Metempsychosis, for Lee, is thus more than the assumption of a new appearance: it is the assumption of a new character altogether. As Bird composed his novel, he kept lists of other bodies Lee could have inhabited, including a “genteel forger, counterfeiter, and bank robber,” a “soldier in [the] black Hawk War, where the gen’ls get all the credit,” and “The patriot—the ardent young virginian [sic] elected to Congress, where he finds nothing but miserable selfishness” (Looby xvi-xvii). Bird also lists as a possibility “The popular actor”: Looby finds this a missed opportunity, and he wishes “that Bird had at least had Sheppard Lee do a turn as an actor: after Bird’s own falling-out with Forrest, he doubtless had a rich trove of reflections on what might be called professional metempsychosis” (xvii).³¹ In what follows I claim that Bird does have Lee take a turn as a type of actor, one whose talent for metempsychosis lies at the center of his popular appeal: the blackface minstrel. Scholars such as Eric Lott and W. T. Lhamon have recently argued that blackface minstrelsy suggests that race is a construction

rooted in cultural expectations and social display rather than a natural fact rooted in the body.\textsuperscript{32} Because it toys with prevailing ideas about race and the body, the genre is, like \textit{Sheppard Lee}, a comedy of embodiment. Both minstrelsy and Bird’s novel trade in stock characters—the happy slave, the big-city dandy—and part of the comedic appeal in each case is the interplay between a character’s exterior (burnt cork, a rejuvenated corpse) and his interior (a white actor, Lee’s soul).

The key difference between minstrelsy and Lee’s serial embodiment is that the minstrel’s audience knows that he is not the character he is playing, but Lee, especially in Tom’s case, purports to be the same person whose body he haunts. By twining metempsychosis and minstrelsy, Bird’s novel suggests that the stereotyped behaviors Lee construes as inherent to Tom’s body are in fact drawn from the popular stage.

Each body Lee inhabits comprises a separate book of the novel, and the heading of Tom’s announces that it is the book “In which Sheppard Lee finds everything black about him” (331). We could interpret the word “about” in “everything black about him” to mean “around”; the phrase might then refer to the darkness of unconsciousness because the book begins just as Lee first gains consciousness in Tom’s body. But we may also interpret “everything black about him” to mean everything (racially) black about Sheppard Lee. At a broad level, the phrase is a simple play on Lee’s inhabiting a black man’s body. More specifically, though, it suggests that

\textsuperscript{32} Kwame Anthony Appiah and Walter Benn Michaels, among others, have made important criticisms of the idea of race as a social construction. Appiah writes that “culture talk is not so very far from the race talk that it would supplant liberal discourse” (136). See Kwame Anthony Appiah, \textit{The Ethics of Identity}. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005. Michaels argues that to view race as a social construction is to view race as culture, to him an impotent conflation: “If race really were culture, people could change their racial identity, siblings could belong to different races, people who were as genetically unlike each other as it’s possible for two humans to be could nonetheless belong to the same race. None of these things is possible in the United States today” (133-34). See Michaels’ \textit{Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism}. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. But minstrelsy is precisely about changing race, even if temporarily, artificially, and for others’ entertainment.
Lee’s blackness will come not from Tom’s body but from Lee himself: Lee will face everything black about himself, not everything black about Tom. If Lee’s experience of racial blackness comes from his own repertoire of troubling racial imagery, then any attribution of Lee’s actions to Tom’s body stands on shaky ground.

Bird weaves blackface minstrelsy into his investigation of medical embodiment by routing Lee’s narration of his experiences in Tom’s body through minstrel music and iconography. Tellingly, the novel foreshadows the minstrelsy of Tom’s section even before Lee transmigrates into the slave’s body. In the course of being forcibly transported to Louisiana by abolitionist-hunting Southerners in Zachariah Longstraw’s body, he hears music from a farmhouse, “a great sawing of fiddles and strumming of banjoes, with a shuffling of feet, as of people engaged in a dance, while a voice, which I knew, by its undoubted Congo tang, could be none but a negro’s, sang, in concert with the fiddles—

Ole Vaginnee! Nebber ti—ah!
Kick’m up, Juba, a leettle high—ah,—” (311).

It is important to keep in mind that Lee cannot actually see the singer: his legs are bound, so he has limited mobility in his captors’ wagon, and his assertion that the singer’s voice is a “negro’s” is only substantiated by the singer’s dialect (311). Lee’s certainty of the singer’s race—the “undoubted Congo tang”—being predicated on sound rather than the usual racial marker of skin color actually introduces uncertainty about the singer’s race when we consider this passage in light of the blackface minstrel practice of imitating and exaggerating African-American speech.

33 Jack Kerkering writes about the ways that specific “formal effects” in text and music have been thought of as “perform[ing] [the] function of expressing a people’s identity,” whether that identity is national or racial (19). He argues that certain musical features were and are viewed as essentially black. He does not extend his argument on race to the early nineteenth century, but it would follow that in Bird’s time sound might have been as determinative a racial marker—the
Such uncertainty would not be unfounded, for the line “Old Virginy never tire” is sung in the immensely popular song “Clare de Kitchen,” dated to 1832 and performed by the character Jim Crow and many others (Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow* 137).

“Old Virginia never tires” was a phrase common in the nineteenth century (perhaps more so in Virginia than elsewhere) meant to express Virginians’ hardworking nature. In “Clare de Kitchen,” it is part of the chorus emphasizing the cleaners’ energy: “Oh! Clare de kitchen, old folks, young folks, / Clare de kitchen, old folks, young folks, / Old Virginy never tire.” (137).

The line “Kick’em up, Juba, a leetle high—ah,—” refers to the Juba dance, a step-dance performed by a ring of dancers who would stomp, shuffle, and raise one leg (or “kick’em up”) as they turned on the other. A more subtle reference to minstrelsy is Lee’s wondering “what could make a negro in Pennsylvania chant the praises of Virginia,” likely a nod to minstrel songs’ propensity for aggrandizing the South despite (or because of) their typically being performed in theatres in Northern cities such as New York City and Philadelphia (Cockrell 35). Though we, much like Lee, cannot be sure if he is passing by an actual slave gathering or a minstrel show, I suggest that the music is an early instance of the novel’s interest in vexing the notion that racial blackness necessarily originates in black bodies.

This interpretation is corroborated by recent research on minstrelsy that understands the genre, particularly in its early years, as expressing the constructedness of race by probing what Eric Lott calls the “social relations of ‘racial’ production” (39). Specifically, he writes,

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“undoubted” mark of blackness, says Lee—as skin color. If so, then minstrelsy’s troubling of the color line would be as much about race’s sonic elements as its visual elements.

34 An early version of “Clare de Kitchen,” for example, concludes with the singer lamenting, “I wish I was back in old Kentuck” (Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow* 139). The minstrel song “Dixie,” which begins with “I wish I was in the land of cotton,” is a later iteration of this tendency.
minstrelsy is predicated upon “small but significant crimes against settled ideas of racial demarcation” (4). J. Martin Favor argues, “Minstrelsy suggests at its root that ‘race’ is performable, if not always already performed. … ‘Race’ is theatrical—it is an outward spectacle—rather than anything internal or essential” (123). Favor’s and Lott’s arguments should not be taken to mean that minstrelsy is antiracist: at a fundamental level, the “joke” of blackface minstrelsy is at the expense of black Americans represented on stage by stock racist stereotypes. Bird’s use of minstrelsy as a vehicle for critiquing embodiment means that he seems to endorse those stereotypes: Tom’s section of the novel depicts slaves as lazy and childish. I thus echo Lott’s stance of not being “one of those critics who see in a majority of minstrel songs an unalloyed self-criticism by whites under cover of blackface” (119). However, minstrels’ efforts to “try on blackness” crossed and reimagined the color line in ways that make it something more complex than a straightforward mockery of black Americans (6). While I would not go so far as W. T. Lhamon’s assertion that blackface performers were “enacting miscegenation” onstage, it is clear that blackface minstrelsy can at some times blur and sidestep racial boundaries even as it reasserts them at others (Raising Cain 42).

When Lee gains consciousness in Tom’s body, he finds himself startled by his new appearance: “I saw a fragment of looking-glass hanging on the wall within my reach. I snatched it down, and took a survey of my physiognomy. Miserable me! my face was as black as my arms—and, indeed, somewhat more so—presenting a sable globe, broken only by two red lips of immense magnitude, and a brace of eyes as white and as wide as plain China saucers, or peeled turnips” (331-332). This passage, anchored by the “physiognomy” of Tom’s face, is strikingly visual. “Physiognomy” is itself a suggestive term for Bird to use, as it can refer to either the physical features of a face or the contemporary practice of divining personal traits from the
human face. Bird’s choice of “physiognomy”—he easily could have written “features” instead—and his italicization of the word “face” invites us to attend closely to Tom’s. When we do so, we may notice that Tom’s face is somewhat out of sorts, given the thingness of its component parts: a black sphere, enormous red lips, and eyes pale and round as “saucers” or “turnips.” This unnatural, object-oriented description implies some degree of manufacture to Tom’s face, and indeed, blackface minstrelsy trades in such manufacture. If Virginia is where Lee discovers everything black about himself, then this moment tells us that Lee’s conception of racial blackness is characterized by its reliance on minstrel imagery. His descriptions of other bodies’ appearances do not rely on such caricature: when he looks into a mirror in Dawkins’ body, he sees “his exact representation, perfect in beard and visage, save that the former was in great disorder, and the latter somewhat white, and equally perfect in figure” (105). And Bird’s nod to blackface minstrelsy during Lee’s first awareness of his black embodiment is only one thread of a broader pattern of minstrel imagery.

That pattern, which persists throughout Tom’s section, creates a counter-discourse to Lee’s portrayal of embodiment. By exploring the friction between how that portrayal depicts the mind-body relationship and how minstrelsy does the same, Bird anticipates Steven Johnson’s argument that “the blacked-up white performer only pretends to lose control, but in fact is expressing just how controlled and controlling he is” (96). Lee performs a similar song and dance: he contends that he acts as he does because he does not control his body, and that contention is the basis of his abdication of moral agency. But the blackface imagery in Tom’s section suggests that, like a blackface minstrel, he “only pretends to lose control.” I argue that the same holds for Lee. If his portrayal of embodiment allows him to claim that the body controls the mind, then his minstrel performance of Tom emphasizes the very opposite: the white minstrel
directs his purportedly black body’s actions, not the other way around. Lee places moral blame on others’ bodies, but in this novel bodies are not nearly so agential as Lee says. Rather, Bird seems to suggest, they are like the minstrel’s boot polish mask: without the animating power of a willful actor, they are only dead material. The body, then, cannot hold the moral weight Lee places upon it.

Much as he does in other sections of the book, Lee often expresses his experience as Tom in ways that undercut his claims about the body’s determinative power over behavior. After he recovers from the shock of seeing Tom’s face in the mirror, he addresses an old woman standing next to his bed, he calls her “Aunty,” and explains, “why I addressed the old lady thus I know not; but I have observed that negroes always address their seniors by the titles of uncle and aunt, and I suppose the instinct was on me” (332-333). Lee begins his explanation of the term “Aunty” by asserting that he does not know why he said it, but he then posits that “instinct” prodded him. However, his warrant for supposing that “instinct”—presumably Tom’s body insinuating itself into Lee’s consciousness—led him to say “Aunty” is only validated by post-hoc observance of black Americans. Further confounding his explanation is that he can only “suppose” that instinct was the driving force behind his speech. Per Lee’s account of embodiment, he should be able to provide a physiological explanation of his new behavior predicated upon the first-hand experience of being in Tom’s body, but he does not. Instead, he explains Tom only in relation to other black Americans he has observed.

Lee’s recourse to observation as validating purportedly authentic “black” behavior and speech mirrors and invokes the same practice in blackface minstrelsy. A legend surrounding T. D. Rice’s performances as Jim Crow is that he learned his song and dance from observing an old African-American stablehand singing and dancing (Cockrell 63). Surprisingly, many observers
appear to have believed that his performances were exact replicas of African-American dances. Lhamon presents three contemporary accounts of his performances precisely to that effect, one of which raves over Rice’s “close delineations of the corn-field negro, drawn from real life” (Lhamon, *Raising Cain* 169). Through blackface minstrelsy, then, the discourses of mimesis and social display collude in the production of purportedly authentic blackness. Lee’s explanation of his use of “Aunty” follows similar lines, authenticating Tom’s “instinct” to say the word with his observations of other black Americans doing so. Lee’s explanation, by dramatizing the appropriative process of blackface minstrels, calls attention to his reliance on minstrel imagery in his depictions of black subjectivity.

Lee adjusts with speed to live as a slave. He describes his owner’s kindness at length, does no more work than he cares to do, and dreams of “eating Johnny-cake and fried bacon” while lounging by a riverbank, behaviors he ascribes to his black body (336). As Christopher Looby remarks, Lee’s contentment makes “Tom, the happy slave” the novel’s “most unsettling invention”; it is also a sign of Bird’s willingness to reinscribe minstrelsy’s racist imagery in the course of exploring its twist on embodiment (xxxiv). The other slaves demonstrate the same contentment as Lee. After Lee’s fellow slave Governor finds an illustrated abolitionist pamphlet in a cart filled with timber, he launches into a comical pantomime of the whipped slaves he sees depicted: “he rubbed his back, now here, now there, now with the right, now with the left hand; now ducking to the earth, now jumping into the air, as though some lusty overseer were plying

35 Lara Cohen’s *The Fabrication of American Literature* makes the compelling argument that mass cultural interest in blackface minstrelsy culminated in the displacement of the fraudulence inherent to minstrelsy onto black Americans themselves; thus, “at the very moment when white Americans began to imitate African Americans, they also began to claim that African Americans possessed an innate talent for imitation” (96-7). Even “authentic” blackness, then, would be a type of social display.
him, whip in hand, with all his might” (347). As Governor leaps and jumps—or dances—along with his imaginary flogging, he looks at a picture of a slave tied to a gum tree and yells:

Oh! de possum up de gum-tree,
‘Coony in de hollow:
Two white men whip a nigga,
How de nigga holla! (348)

The lines “possum up de gum-tree, / ‘Coony in de hollow” appear in two separate popular early minstrel songs, “Jump Jim Crow” (1832) and “Zip Coon” (1834), suggesting Bird’s consciously choosing blackface minstrel lyrics for Governor’s song (Lhamon, Jump Jim Crow 97 and Cockrell 95). Indeed, most of the scenes in which the slaves gather depict them in ways reminiscent of minstrel shows, which offers a possible explanation for why the plantation slaves seem so peculiarly content. They sing and dance at every opportunity, for example: on pleasant evenings the field-hands play “banjoes, fiddles, and clacking-bones,” causing Lee to feel “an unaccountable desire to join them, which I did, dancing with all my might,” a sight that would have been familiar to audiences of minstrel shows in the 1820s and 30s (339).

A more visual gesture towards blackface minstrelsy is Lee’s choice of clothing in Tom’s body that aligns him with Zip Coon, a minstrel character popularized by the minstrel George Washington Dixon as a preening “pretender, a charlatan, a confidence man,” a black dandy who imitates the white upper class (Mahar 209). This alignment is important because Zip Coon, more than other minstrel characters, provides insight into blackface minstrelsy’s particular twist on the body’s indexical relationship to race: Zip Coon is a white man pretending to be a black man who in turn takes on the habiliments of the white upper class, zigzagging rather than crossing the color line and calling attention to the ways that minstrel disguise unsettles attempts to locate a single, natural character within the body. As Lee settles into his new identity, he begins to admire his visage more than he initially does, becoming “something of a coxcomb” (342). On
Sundays he dresses up “in one of my master’s coats well brushed up, a bran-new rabbit-fur hat, the gift of little Tommy, a ruffled shirt, and a white neckcloth, with a pair of leather gloves swinging in one hand, and a peeled beechen wand by way of cane in the other” (342). Such a close sartorial invocation of a popular minstrel character, to say nothing of Lee’s meeting a “fiddler and banjo-player” named Zip (short for Scipio), strongly suggests that Bird wishes to evoke Zip Coon (360).

The novel stages the confluence of minstrelsy and embodiment through Lee’s speculations about his purported inability to remember his original self while in Tom’s body: “I forgot that I once had been a freeman, or, to speak more strictly, I did not remember it, the act of remembering involving an effort of mind which it did not comport with my new habits of laziness and indifference to make, though perhaps I might have done so, had I chosen. ... I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of any thing but the present (341). In the passage, Lee claims that remembering his past selves requires mental effort that Tom’s laziness and indifference cannot support. Laziness is indeed Lee’s primary characteristic in Tom’s body, but Lee himself is extraordinarily lazy. Early in the novel, Lee describes his “natural disposition” as “placid and easy,—I believe I may say sluggish. I was not wanting in parts, but had as little energy or activity of mind as ever fell to the share of a Jerseyman” (10). This intimates that his “new habits of laziness and indifference” are not new at all, but rather a part of Lee’s original personality. Further, he says he “might” have been able to remember if he had chosen to do so, suggesting that Tom’s body is not the cause of his forgetting himself, but rather in his role as Tom he chooses not to remember—doing otherwise, he “could not have been an African.” Lee’s portrayal of black subjectivity, then, is in many ways merely an exaggerated
rendition of his own sloth: remember that it is in Virginia that Lee discovers “every thing black about him” (331). Just as Lee

If Lee’s claim that he cannot remember his past selves in Tom’s body is true, then Lee in Tom’s body is “simply Tom”; the implication, as Lee notes, is that he cannot be held responsible for Tom’s actions (341). Lee’s purported inability to remember his past selves underwrites his blamelessness for his role in the violent slave revolt that closes Tom’s section. The seeds of the revolt are planted by the abolitionist pamphlet found by Governor. Because the other slaves are illiterate, Lee volunteers to read it aloud, though if he had truly forgotten his past selves he would not be able to do so: “nevertheless, I had a feeling in me as if I could read” (350). He makes out the title of the pamphlet to be “THE FATE OF THE SLAVE” and finds within its pages a discourse between a Quaker and a slaveholder in which the abolitionist declares slaves to be “unjustly, treacherously, and unrighteously held in bonds” (350, 353). As Murison and others have noted, the document is a reference to the American Anti-Slavery Society’s 1835 campaign to pour abolitionist print material into the South (Murison 15). The tract causes a radical change in the affections of Lee and his fellows: reading the pamphlet causes the slaves to undergo “a revolution in our feelings as surprising as it was fearful” (355). They fill with “sentimental notions about liberty and equality,” making Lee “a willing listener to, and sharer in, the schemes of violence and desperation which my fellow-slaves soon began to frame” (357). The pamphlet provokes a change in Lee’s feelings that rehearses the symptoms of moral insanity: he says that it “infected” him, a term that makes the pamphlet as much a disease as an argument (377). He and the other slaves fall, as Pinel writes, under the “domination of instinctive and abstract fury” and act upon it by revolting (150).
The revolt is bloody and seems inspired by Nat Turner’s rebellion rather than a minstrel show: Lee’s master, his younger daughter, her older sister, and that sister’s suitor are all killed in the skirmish (369). In a gruesome scene, the younger daughter, flung by her sister from the rooftop presumably to save her from being raped, is “cruelly mangled” by the fall and takes hours to die (369). Lee finds himself in no way responsible for the events he catalyzed, however, because he had forgotten that he was anyone but Tom: “It is wonderful, that among the many thoughts that now crowded my brain, no memory of my original condition arose to teach me the folly of my desires. But, and I repeat it again, the past was dead with me; I lived only for the present” (357). However, the minstrel iconography shadowing Tom’s section of the novel indicates that his “original condition” as Lee is not at all “dead,” but rather masked. Despite Lee’s efforts to displace moral agency onto Tom’s body, minstrelsy reminds us that white men can hide under black skins.

**Coda: Comedy and Interpretation**

If *Sheppard Lee* teaches us anything, it is that comedy does not allow for tidy conclusions. Satire and minstrelsy, especially, offer multiple meanings because they are essentially imitative; the minstrel’s dance can be received as an authentic rendition of racial blackness or as a white man’s winking parody of the same. Missing minstrelsy’s doubled, imitative nature might mean thinking, as many did, that T. D. Rice actually was Jim Crow. Likewise, as I have argued, reading satire in a way unattuned to its ability to at once duplicate and mock its target risks conflating it with what it derides. The recent critical reception of *Sheppard Lee* stands as an example; scholars such as Otter have read the novel straightforwardly.

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36 As the references to the Nullification Crisis in “Jump Jim Crow” attest, minstrelsy did not ignore the possibility that slaves would take up arms in a sectional conflict. But the revolt in *Sheppard Lee* much more closely fits the circumstances of Turner’s rebellion.
(and with straight faces) as an endorsement of what they assume is Bird’s own medicine-inflected vision of embodiment. Part of the appeal of that reading, I suspect, is how Sheppard Lee seems custom-made for the “physiological turn” in literary studies.37

But attending to Bird’s comedy reveals an interaction between literature and medicine is more ambivalent than has previously been acknowledged in readings of Bird’s work. There is a looseness and openness to comedy that is able to capture just how equivocal such interactions can prove to be. As minstrelsy demonstrates, the artful, comedic play between seemingly contradictory terms (black/white, interiority/exteriority, authentic/counterfeit) a central feature of one of the early nineteenth century’s most popular entertainments. Bird, who mocks all he surveys and thus denies conclusive interpretation, asks us to confront what this sort of play means for how we read. In the case of Sheppard Lee, it means attuning ourselves to misdirections and uncertainties that dramatize a relationship between literature and medicine that is no less tangled than it is vibrant.

CHAPTER THREE: DIGESTING *MOBY-DICK*: STOMACH, BRAIN, AND TEXT

Thus the habitual manner in which digestion is performed or affected, makes us either sad, gay, taciturn, gossiping[,] morose or melancholy, without our being able to doubt the fact, or to resist it for a moment.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin  
*The Physiology of Taste; or, Transcendental Gastronomy* (228)

We resumed business; and while plying our spoons in the bowl, thinks I to myself, I wonder now if this here has any effect on the head?

Herman Melville  
*Moby-Dick* (NN MD 67)

At roughly the same time that theorists of moral insanity such as James Cowles Prichard turned to the nervous system to understand seemingly irrational and insane behavior, other physicians looked to the digestive system as a way to understand how best to care for the nervous system. Sheppard Lee’s final borrowed body, that of the dyspeptic Arthur Megrim, leaves him so bedeviled by digestive disorders that the revolt is the last significant opportunity for Lee to make trouble before he returns to his original body, conveniently preserved by Feuerteufel, a German physician. Megrim’s sister, Ann, worries endlessly over her brother’s health: she feels her “chief duty of existence” to be “the care of [Megrim’s] digestive apparatus” and nerves (386). As this chapter explores in detail, the digestive system was believed to be in sympathetic resonance with the nervous system in Bird’s time; thus, Ann’s worry is that Megrim’s discomfited stomach might be a sign of a debilitated nervous system. Indeed, Ann is well-read in the literature of dyspepsia, at one point interpreting her brother’s involuntarily winking eye as a “sign” that his “digestive apparatus is getting out of order”; she goes on to remark that he is “beginning to look yellow and bilious” and that “the alkalis of [his] biliary
fluids … were beginning to fail to coalesce, in the natural chymical way, with the acids of the chymous mass; and that no better argument could be made to prove that [his] digestive apparatus was getting out of order” (389-90). Ann delivers this diagnostic assault, Lee remarks, “with a pertinacity equal to the disease itself” (390). Her ceaseless care becomes, finally, one of his disorder’s “worst symptoms” (390).

Far from an anomaly, Ann’s obsession with digestion’s effects on the nervous system is part of a broader system of beliefs about the stomach and brain that pertained in midcentury America. Antebellum physiology envisioned neural and alimentary structures as anatomically and functionally linked, joined by the “sympathetic nerve” (now termed the vagus nerve) stretching from brain to stomach. Eating the right food, many reasoned, makes for a healthy brain; conversely, a stomach irritated by improper digestion might disorder the brain and corrode the mind. This view was held by a diverse group including dietary reformers, cookbook authors, and physicians: while domestic guides such as Catharine Beecher’s popular Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) urged the centrality of food to mental function, medical works such as Wilson Philip’s Treatise on Indigestion and its Consequences, Called Nervous and Bilious Complaints (1824) and James Johnson’s Essays on the Morbid Sensibility of the Stomach and Bowels (1827) and popular dietary reform movements such as Grahamism emphasized that common digestive troubles could lead to insanity. Earlier in the century, British Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, author of A Vindication of Natural Diet (1813), believed that “all bodily and mental derangements” could be traced to the consumption of meat and alcohol (16). These and other writings argue that attending to one’s digestion by carefully monitoring the
circumstances of one’s ingestion—specifically, what is ingested and in what manner—is the best way to maintain mental control.\(^{38}\)

In this chapter I argue that Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) puts into motion the ethical and religious aspects of dietary reformers’ ideas about the connections between the stomach and the brain by depicting, through the lens of Ishmael’s own dyspeptic narration, how its characters’ diets affect their moral and spiritual lives.\(^{39}\) I argue that reformers’ ideas enabled nineteenth-century Americans to view their dietary choices as shaping their mind-bodies and therefore their very selves.\(^{40}\) Political theorist Jane Bennett writes that the philosophical projects of Thoreau and Nietzsche affirm the “productive power intrinsic to foodstuff, which enables edible matter to coarsen or refine the imagination or render a disposition more or less liable to

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\(^{38}\) The nineteenth-century idea that healthy digestion benefits the brain bears some resemblance to the present-day interest in so-called “brain foods” rich in omega-3 fats, i.e. fish, soybeans, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, brains. Despite this similarity, the two concepts have no strict genealogical relation.

\(^{39}\) Other literary scholars have addressed digestion reform. Michelle C. Neely’s recent work on Thoreau’s vegetarian dietary practices, which were borrowed from reformer Sylvester Graham, asks us to reevaluate *Walden’s* (1854) “embodied politics” (34). When we do so, she argues, we understand how antebellum theories of diet and digestion are situated within “consequential debates over capitalism, citizenship, freedom, and the body” (34). Likewise, Sean Ross Meehan draws on the history of physiology and medicine to describe what he calls “the poetics of digestion” in Emerson’s and Whitman’s writing (101). For Meehan, digestion’s ability to break down matter and assimilate it into new forms “offers a paradox of identity through change” that complicates prevailing ways of thinking about Emerson’s influence on Whitman (101). And Kyla Wazana Tompkins studies the ways that nineteenth-century writers figure racially black bodies as both edible and prodigiously hungry.

\(^{40}\) A note on terms: dietary reformers understood the mind-body relationship as so entwined that to write of them as distinct—“the mind” and “the body”—would be ahistorical. I therefore use the term “mind-body” to more accurately capture the ways dietary reformers and their followers understood themselves. By “self” I mean one’s experience, whether embodied or not, of a personal identity with consciousness and agency.
ressentiment, depression, hyperactivity, dull-wittedness, or violence” (49). Digestion is thus “the formation of an assemblage of human and nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity” (49). Nineteenth-century Americans’ attempts to guide the formation of such assemblages by exercising control of their diets, I claim, made their choices about how and what they consumed a technology for sculpting the embodied self.

Working within this analytical framework, I argue that *Moby-Dick* addresses the philosophical, religious, and racial aspects of this technology. Attending to digestion in *Moby-Dick*, I claim, illuminates Melville’s attempts to counter Emersonian hopes of transcending the body. I conclude that examining digestion and efforts to control it yields new ways of thinking about embodiment in both *Moby-Dick* and the mid-nineteenth century generally.

The chapter’s first section traces the emergence of the idea that the stomach affects the brain in antebellum medicine. I demonstrate that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theories of the nervous system understood the body’s organs, including the brain and stomach, as interconnected in ways that spread any one organ’s disorders to the others. Because these theories, collected in their time under the term “nervous sympathy,” posited the brain-stomach connection as especially close, physicians such as Alexander Philip Wilson Philip and James Johnson characterized indigestion as detrimental to neural and therefore mental health. Philip and Johnson both identify dietary management as key to avoiding this dangerous condition; I thus argue that they make dietary management thinkable as a tool of reform. The second section surveys the mid-nineteenth-century dietary reform movement, with a focus on Sylvester Graham, by far the most influential dietary reformer in America. Dietary reform, I claim, constructed a set of beliefs about the stomach that led nineteenth-century Americans to attempt to control their

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41 I use the term “technology” in its broadest sense to refer to the combination of skills and resources to attain desired goals.
digestions to mold and improve their selves. Drawing on Nikolas Rose’s and Joelle M. Abi-Rached’s work on self-governance, I analyze the strange duality to be found in dietary reform: reformers figured digestion as an unconscious bodily process that affects consciousness, sometimes intensely, an idea that would strike many today as deterministic, but the technology of dietary management allowed eaters to understand themselves as taking charge of their own embodiment. The moral insanity debate, treated in Chapter 2, concerns in part the ethical ramifications of mental processes being influenced by bodily processes; dietary management promises to regulate that influence.

In the chapter’s third section, I turn to Moby-Dick; I argue that the novel takes dietary reform as an opportunity to examine the body’s role in philosophy, religion, and race. I argue that in the novel Melville counters such thinkers as Emerson and Goethe, who seek to transcend their bodies to enjoy unity with all things, with dietary reformers’ insistence on the primacy of the body in human experience. I claim that he portrays metaphysical speculation, philosophical and theological alike, as grounded in and answering to the body. For Melville, the hope of becoming a transparent eyeball—permeable, without physical substance yet still able to perceive the surrounding world—is, because it ignores the human body, just that: a hope (or an illusion). The fourth section argues that Moby-Dick counters contemporary theories about racial differences in digestion by positing self-control, not race, as determining how one eats. Reading the harpooners’ dinner, the officers’ dinner, and Fleece’s sermon to the sharks alongside one another, I claim that the novel depicts, as Fleece says, governing one’s voracious nature as the point of virtue, regardless of race (295). The fifth section reads the gam on the Samuel Enderby as posing indigestion as a cause of Moby Dick’s violence.
My argument diverges from other scholars’ work on Melville and embodiment. Ralph James Savarese writes on the centrality of dyspepsia to the cultural commentary of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) and “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” (1853), but he primarily treats it as one item of a “long list of sociomedical afflictions attributed to the stress of industrialization” instead of treating it on its own terms (20). Paul Brodtkorb’s phenomenological study of Ishmael’s narrative emphasizes the primacy of Ishmael’s bodily experience in his consciousness (9). His approach, however, does not take into account how contemporary discourses about the body might have influenced Melville’s work. Samuel Otter argues that the novel “gives access to the excess of the extraordinary nineteenth-century quest for bodily knowledge,” amassing “an anatomy of anatomies, a viscerally immanent critique of nineteenth-century efforts to get inside the body, and to gauge and rank its character” (102). He charts how Ishmael discovers, as he calls upon the sciences of dermatology, craniometry, physiognomy, and phrenology to disclose Moby Dick’s secrets, that they and similar nineteenth-century sciences make the epistemological mistake of conflating interior and exterior (154). To this insight I would add that *Moby-Dick* also emphasizes the futility of, on one hand, disengaging interior from exterior altogether, or, on the other, reversing the two.

**The Most Varied of All Diseases**

The forty-third chapter of *Moby-Dick*, titled “Hark!,” depicts a line of sailors transferring buckets of water hand-to-hand from one of the *Pequod’s* fresh water butts to the scuttle-butt in the middle of the night (196). One sailor, Archy, asks his neighbor, Cabaco, if he hears coughing under the after-hatches (as readers soon discover, the coughing comes from the “five dusky phantoms” headed by Fedallah whom Ahab secretly stows on the ship) (196, 228). Cabaco, intent on his work, replies, “Cough be damned! Pass along that return bucket” (196). Archy
insists he also hears sleepers turning over underdeck, to which Cabaco retorts, “Caramba! have done, shipmate, will ye? It’s the three soaked biscuits ye eat for supper turning over inside ye—nothing else. Look to the bucket!” (196-97). Echoing Ebenezer Scrooge’s dismissal of Jacob Marley’s ghost as “an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato,” Cabaco assumes that indigestion has affected Archy’s senses.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, physicians understood the stomach and the brain as mutually affecting. The concept underlying this understanding is nervous sympathy, which historian of science Evelyn L. Forget writes “characterize[s] the unconscious communication between different organs in the human body” via the nerves (282). Physiologists used nervous sympathy to conceptualize the organs’ communication as a series of reflexive, unconscious feedback loops. Nervous sympathy explained why a stomachache can become a headache, why blood temperature remains constant, and how diverse organs can act in concert to produce one functioning being. Robert Whytt, who as a professor of medicine in Edinburgh influenced nerve scientist William Cullen, first described the workings of nervous sympathy in the mid-eighteenth century (291). Whytt conceptualized the nerves as coterminous with what he called the “sentient principle,” which coordinates organs’ responses to stimuli through nervous sympathy (291). The sentient principle, acting as the switchboard operator of the nerves, puts even the most distant organs into sympathetic relation. If “the nervous system, and nervous function, became the mechanism that coordinated the actions of the human body,” Forget writes, then “nervous sympathy was the tool of its communication” (291). The brain was no longer

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42 As Christopher Lawrence writes, Cullen “presented a totally naturalistic account of health and disease based on the laws of the environment-organism relationship” in which the nervous system played a central role (171).
considered to be in charge of the nervous system but rather a part of it. Such an understanding of the brain’s place in the nervous system meant that the brain was thought to be vulnerable to the ailments of the organs to which the nerves connected it.

In the early nineteenth century, the stomach emerged as among the organs most in sympathy with the brain. I trace this idea to Alexander Philip Wilson Philip, a Scottish physician who received much of his education from William Cullen, Whytt’s disciple. As the title of his foundational work on indigestion, *A Treatise on Indigestion and Its Consequences, Called Nervous and Bilious Complaints; with Observations on the Organic Diseases in Which They Sometimes Terminate*, first published in 1821 and revised and reprinted until 1842, suggests, Philip viewed “nervous” as synonymous with “bilious.” If his mentor William Cullen’s contribution to medicine was to view most diseases as nervous in nature, then Philip’s was to explore the ways that nervous disorders could be understood as either causing or having been caused by indigestion. He writes that the “sympathies of the stomach” are so widespread and powerful that “whatever greatly disorders the function of any important organ may be ranked among the causes of Indigestion” (87). The resultant indigestion, in turn, “so re-acts on the digestive organs” as to further sympathetically afflict the originally disordered organ (75). A disease can thus flow back and forth from the liver to the stomach, for example, feeding on itself and worsening rapidly: Philip writes that in this way disease sometimes leads to death “with a rapidity which at first view appears unaccountable” (76). And because the brain “is one of those

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parts which are most apt to sympathize with the digestive organs,” even slight digestive complaints can result, if untreated, in impaired mental function (295).

Because Philip views indigestion as having the potential to damage or even destroy the body’s organs, he devotes a large portion of his treatise to a set of complex and exacting dietary guidelines. Similarly complex dietary rules reappear in the works of physicians, dietary reformers, and cookbook writers through the mid-nineteenth century. I read them as arising not from xenophobic fear of “foreign” foods, as Tompkins asserts of Graham’s rules, but from the real sense that to ignore one’s diet was to endanger one’s life (Tompkins 81). Philip’s guidelines comprise “diet and exercise both of mind and body” (125). Of the diet, he writes that one should “eat moderately and slowly” to ensure the food is “masticated and mixed with saliva” before traveling to the stomach (126). One ought to avoid “[t]ough, ascensent, and oily articles of food with a large proportion of liquid” because they dilute the gastric juices; “a diet, composed pretty much of animal food and stale bread, is the best” for those suffering mild indigestion (128). Yet beef is “most apt to excite fever,” so game meats are preferable (129). Because, he says, “meat most mixed with fat” is “most oppressive” to the stomach, fatty meats such as pork, geese, pheasant, and duck are difficult to digest (130). 44 Turkey (without the skin) and the “lean part of venison” are preferable (130). Fish, he writes, is less easily digestible than “the flesh of land animals,” and less nutritive (130). Because any food that might create a paste-like consistency in the stomach is difficult to digest, Philip recommends avoiding new bread, “[a]ll articles composed of strong jellies, and food carefully mashed” (132). Fresh vegetables, which, he writes, ferment in the stomach, are “injurious,” but “mealy potatoes, turnips, and broccoli” may be boiled and eaten. He also counsels avoiding fruit, butter, milk, oil, anything fried, alcohol, 44 Dietary restrictions against fat continue into the present day, although we differentiate between so-called “healthy” (unsaturated) fats and “unhealthy” (saturated) fats.
coffee, tea, and iced drinks (136-37, 145, 153). Moderate exercise in the open air also, he says, prevents and treats mild cases of indigestion (169).

Philip’s characterization of indigestion as “the most varied of all diseases,” a disorder that “so undermines every power of the system, that it is difficult to give a view of its symptoms,” establishes one of dyspepsia’s defining qualities: its protean range and power (4). “It is,” he writes, “an affection of the central part of a most complicated structure [the nervous system], capable of influencing even its remotest parts, and each, through many channels, and in various ways” (4). This model of dyspepsia as affecting and affected by the rest of the body “through many channels, and in various ways” enables Philip and those he influenced to construe any ailment as in some way connected to the stomach. When Philip writes that in dyspepsia “the organic affection rarely takes place in the original seat of the disease [the stomach], but in other organs with which the stomach sympathizes, the liver, pancreas, spleen, mesenteric glands, lower bowels, heart, lungs, brain, &c,” he makes it possible to view all diseases as varieties of indigestion (42). His foregrounding of the stomach lays the groundwork for digestive reformers to locate the stomach as the site of all bodily problems and therefore the site of all possible cures for those problems.

When Irish physician James Johnson followed Philip’s research in *An Essay on Morbid Sensibility of the Stomach and Bowels, as the Proximate Cause, or Characteristic Condition of Indigestion, Nervous Irritability, Mental Despondency, Hypochondriasis, &c. &c.* (1827), he sought to limit the extent to which all diseases could be traced to the stomach. “In short,” he writes, “while I agree with Dr. Philip, that every part of the body sympathizes readily with the stomach, whether in health or disease, I do contend, from attentive observation and long experience, that these sympathetic affections of distant parts end, comparatively speaking, but
rarely, in organic disease” (36). He asserts that Philip’s “doctrine is calculated to excite a great deal too much alarm in the mind of the patient, as well as in that of the inexperienced practitioner” (36). Although Johnson downplays Philip’s insistence on the stomach’s centrality to all disease, he emphasizes the stomach’s influence on the brain much more than Philip. For Johnson, the brain “is the first to sympathise with disorder of the abdominal viscera” (43). Echoing Philip, he asserts that sympathy can volley disease back and forth between organs, “by which the temper is broken and the health impaired” (61). The sympathetic connection is so strong that indigestion can lead to “gusts of passion, fits of despondency, brooding melancholy, permanent irascibility, and still higher grades of intellectual disturbance” (69). Other mental symptoms include “[c]onfusion of thought, unsteadiness of the mind, irritability of the temper, defect of the memory, fickleness of disposition, and many other phenomena which are little suspected of corporeal origin” (43). Symptoms such as “irritability of the temper” and “fickleness of disposition,” by affecting dyspeptics’ moods, project disorders of the body’s nervous sympathy into the social fabric, thus disrupting interpersonal sympathy.

Echoing the pains Benjamin Rush and James Cowles Prichard took to seat the mind in the brain without endorsing materialism, Johnson treads cautiously in his explanation of how gastric disturbances might afflict one’s mental processes. In a section on “Nervous Irritability; Mental Despondency,” he writes that he knows nothing of “the intimate nature of mind”; he wishes to leave “that department” to “metaphysics” (60). “It is very evident,” he says, that “man is a compound being—moral and physical, or mental and corporeal” (60). In a lengthy footnote, he carefully distances himself from materialism: he writes that just as the eye “is the material organ of sight, but it is not the faculty of vision,” the brain is “merely that portion of matter which is in most proximate communication with the mind or immaterial principle” (60-61). The
brain is thus “only an instrument through which the mind receives impressions from without, and transmits its dictates from within” (61). “But,” he writes, “in all intellectual operations, the material organ is as necessary to the mind, as the mind is to the material organ” (61). Although he subscribes to substance dualism, it is a dualism that puts mind and body in close relation, meeting in the brain.

Of indigestion’s effects on the brain, Johnson writes that because the “mind can only be manifested, in this world, through the instrumentality of matter, so its faculties and dispositions are pretty regularly influenced by the state or conditions of our corporeal organs” (60). The mind, he says, suffers along with the body:

Some of our mental faculties, however, are much more under the influence of physical disorder than others: but I much doubt whether any, even the very highest attributes of the mind, can stand completely independent of, and unaffected by, derangement of function or structure in the corporeal fabric. A very slight inflammation of the membranes of the brain, will destroy, for a time, the judgment, the memory, the feelings, the affections, of the greatest philosopher or divine. How, then, can we wonder that various derangements of the body, and especially of those organs with which the brain is closely linked in sympathy, should disturb the subordinate attributes of mind, as, for example, the TEMPER of an individual? (60)

Here two definitions of the word “ruminate” intersect—a philosopher ruminates on existence; a cow ruminates the cud. Nervous sympathy links the two processes together in such a way that one might disorder the other. Johnson goes on to write that “the aids of religion and philosophy, are much less available, and much less effectual” as treatments for deranged minds (60-61). That he specifies that inflamed brain membranes will—not might—“destroy” the mental function of even “the greatest philosopher or divine” illustrates the extent to which he, like his contemporary

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A December 1850 letter to Duyckinck, Melville writes about the pleasure he receives watching his cow ruminate: “it’s a pleasant sight to see a cow move her jaws—she does it so mildly & with such sanctity” (Correspondence 174).
Prichard, understands the mind and brain as the province of physicians, not philosophers and theologians.

If a philosopher’s mind were to be destroyed by indigestion, he or she might not know it: Johnson views the stomach’s influence on the brain as working below the level of consciousness. The temper, he writes, is not altered by the pain of indigestion but rather the sympathetic resonance between stomach and brain: “an individual who would bear … a fit of the gout, or the pain of a surgical operation, will be completely changed in his temper, and become waspish, irascible, and captious, by an irritation of the stomach (transmitted sympathetically to the brain), of which he is perfectly unconscious" (61). Because the stomach affects a dyspeptic person’s brain unconsciously, he or she may not be aware of the onset of the disorder’s mental effects. At the same time, Johnson worries that “connecting irritability of temper with a physical disorder” might “furnish the person thus afflicted, with an excuse for giving way to every impulse of an irritable mind,” especially when that person can say that his or her affliction is unconscious (62) His solution is vigilance: “the moral curb which he should now endeavor to keep on his temper, ought to be more forcibly strained than ever” (62). That vigilance and its attendant practices (self-knowledge and self-control) lie at the heart of Johnson’s approach to what he calls the “abstract of all maladies” (1). His insistence on “a more rigorous system of self-control” makes preventing and treating indigestion a matter of willpower rather than the “farrago of tonics and stimulants” advertised in newspapers (i).

Dietary reformers in the 30s, 40s, and 50s enshrined three important elements of Johnson’s focus on treating indigestion with “self-control” rather than pharmaceuticals: self-knowledge, vigilance, and self-control. Self-knowledge promises to make one an expert on the subject of one’s own body. The self-knower is aware of his or her mental and bodily processes.
and is thus cognizant of those deviations that signal the early stages of disease. Vigilance ensures that those deviations will be recognized for what they are. Self-control allows one to master the impulse to gratify the “palate at the expense of the stomach,” as Philip writes (133). And, as I will discuss in the next section, dietary reformers, as they mediated Johnson’s work, added their own ingredient to this recipe: the concept of using diet to sculpt the self.

**Manufacturing Mind and Soul**

As I explained in the previous chapter, phrenology gave nineteenth-century Americans a popular science of the mind even as it provided scientific cover for racism, classism, and sexism. And because phrenologists took Philip’s and Johnson’s ideas about the stomach’s influence on the brain seriously, their writings often address digestion’s effects on the operations of the mental organs. Orson Fowler, author of *Fowler’s Practical Phrenology* (1840), the most popular midcentury phrenological text, finds diet key to the brain’s health:

> By the truly wonderful process of digestion, food and drink are converted into thought and feeling—are manufactured into mind and soul. Is it then unreasonable to suppose that different kinds of food produce different kinds of mind? Reasonable or unreasonable, it is nevertheless the fact. … Ardent spirits and wine excite the animal organs, located in the base of the brain, more than they do the intellectual or moral faculties. This is unquestionably the fact with every thing heating in its nature; such as condiments, flesh, tea, coffee, and high-seasoned or highly stimulating food of any kind. (30)

He goes on to predict that physiologists will discover that “animal food,” or meat, excites the animalistic mental organs at the back of the head at the expense of the intellectual organs at the front of the head (30). He writes that “vegetable food” will soon be found by physicians to reduce body temperature and thus clear the mind and calm the nerves (30). In a broad sense, then, Fowler agrees with what physicians such as Philip and Johnson thought about the stomach: that different foods digest differently, and that the conditions of the stomach affect other organs, especially the brain.
But the differences between Fowler and the physicians are more interesting because they indicate the ways that reformers adapted medical theories of digestion into their broader ameliorative schemes. In Fowler’s case, he grafts digestion onto phrenology, which forms his core structure of beliefs about the human body. Johnson writes of the stomach as influencing the whole of the brain, particularly its enveloping membrane, which suggests that he does not view indigestion as affecting one part of the brain more than another. For Fowler, who takes cerebral localization as a matter of course, different foods affect different mental organs. Whereas Philip’s dietary guidelines distinguish between more and less healthy meats (turkey without the skin versus fatty beef, for example), Fowler understands all meat as “keeping the body in a highly excited, not to say feverish state,” which overwhelms the delicate intellectual organs that sit atop the head, the furthest away from the rest of the body (30). Those organs require a cool and calm (rather than feverish and irritable) body to function, which necessitates the need for cool, bland food such as vegetables. That he views vegetables as beneficial is at odds entirely with Philip’s and Johnson’s advise to avoid them altogether because they ferment in the stomach, but because Fowler understands “cooling” foods as reducing nervous excitation, he construes them as promoting “placidity of mind” (30). This is to say that although Fowler retains the core elements of medical theories of digestion, he modifies those theories so that they fit with phrenology’s emphasis on equilibrium and balance. Thus, when he writes that to “distinguish yourself intellectually, you must regulate the quantity and quality of your food and drink in accordance with the established laws of physiology, or your wings of fame will be melted in the heat of animal indulgence,” he refashions Johnson’s prescription of self-control as a cure for dyspepsia into the key to intellectual achievement (30).
In what follows I trace how dietary reformers adapted medical theories of digestion to create extensive, sophisticated, and popular systems of self-improvement. These systems incorporate the previously mentioned core elements of Johnson’s treatment of indigestion—self-knowledge, vigilance, and self-control—and make refashioning the self their end. They thus saw managing one’s diet as a way for one to “manufacture mind and soul” according to one’s wishes, as Fowler writes (30). I conceptualize dietary regulation as a technology that allows individuals to guide their bodily processes. To do so, I draw on sociologist Nikolas Rose’s and Joelle M. Abi-Rached’s work on “neurotechnologies,” which they define as techniques that “seem to open ourselves up to new strategies of intervention through the brain” (2). Although they ground their thinking on neurotechnologies in neurological developments of the past forty years, I argue that dietary reformers likewise saw themselves as sculpting the self by making interventions through the brain (via the stomach). Dietary reformers, I claim, made it possible for nineteenth-century Americans to understand themselves as what Rose calls “somatic selves,” shaped by their diets but also able to shape those diets. Whereas phrenology, the mid-nineteenth century’s other popular science of the mind-body, stresses the permanence of one’s mental characteristics, diet renders them malleable. I focus on Sylvester Graham as the most prolific and influential of the dietary reformers.

After dropping out of Amherst College and training as a Presbyterian minister, Sylvester Graham read physiologist François J. V. Broussais’s *Treatise on Physiology*, published in America in 1826, and other physiological and medical texts (Smith 31). Thereafter, he traveled the Northeast delivering lectures on the virtues of temperance and of learning what he called “the science of human life.” He rose to prominence in 1832, when, as food historian Andrew F. Smith

46 By “self” I mean an individual’s sense of identity and subjectivity as defined by the historical and cultural circumstances that form the horizons of his or her self-understanding.
writes, adherents of his dietary regimen of fruits, vegetables, and water “appeared to thrive” in the wake of a cholera epidemic in New York City (29). He achieved fame practically overnight, and he wasted no time publishing the dozens of letters he received from those who believed they had survived cholera because of his diet (29). His influence was such that in 1833 Asenath Nicholson, a boardinghouse owner in New York City, instituted his dietary regimen in what was afterwards known as a “Graham boardinghouse” (33-34). Other Graham boardinghouses soon arose in Boston and other Northern states (34). In an appendix to *A Lecture on Epidemic Diseases Generally* (1833), Graham includes a three-page-long copy of the “Rules and Regulations of the Graham Boarding House,” the contents of which comprise exacting rules for when and how to wake, sleep, eat, bathe, and exercise (78-80). Boarders, a group that included such luminaries as Horace Greeley and William Lloyd Garrison, were to rise between four and five each morning, depending on the season; eat breakfast at seven, lunch at one, and dinner at a mutually agreed-upon time (Smith 34; Graham 78). They were to drink no alcohol, coffee, or tea, and ideally eat no meat, but if meat were served it should be done so simply, without spices or condiments (79). Graham also recommended that boarders take cold sponge-baths daily and immerse themselves wholly in water at least weekly (80).

These rules illustrate the transformation of Philip’s and Johnson’s treatments for indigestion into something more like a lifestyle—a set of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that structure a certain way of living. I argue that the Grahamian lifestyle is not so much a deviation from the physicians as it is an elaboration of their theories of the stomach-brain connection and, more broadly, of the concept of nervous sympathy itself. In *A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity*, first published in 1834, Graham emphasizes the interconnectedness of every organ of the human body, which he says form a “grand web of organic life” (36). He writes that a disturbance in any
part of this web resonates throughout the whole, which does not differ significantly from Johnson’s thought; but Graham’s shift is to dramatically widen the range of what could be considered a disturbance. His use of a web as a metaphor for the nerves is fitting, for he understands them as fragile in the extreme: “All extraordinary and undue excitements,” he writes, “whether caused by mental, moral or physical stimuli, increase the excitability and unhealthy activity of the nerves of normal life; and tend to bring on, and establish in them, a state of diseased irritability and sensibility; which is more or less diffused over the whole domain” (37). In Graham’s view, any nervous excitement whatsoever can be pathological: a caffeine rush would court death. And because in that view nervous excitement can be caused by any “mental, moral or physical stimuli,” not just poorly digested food, avoiding such excitement requires adhering to a controlled regimen such as that found in Graham boardinghouses.

*A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity*, like Graham’s other early writings, focuses on avoiding lust, masturbation, and excessive sex. He writes that because genital nerves “partake, in common with those of other organs, of this general debility and diseased excitability, and become exceedingly susceptible of irritation;—sympathizing powerfully with all the disturbances of the system, and especially of the brain and alimentary canal” (38). Graham thus adds the genitals to the brain-stomach connection, and in doing so he extends his emphasis on exercising abnegation and discipline in diet to sexuality. He recommends shunning “stimulating and heating substances, high-seasoned food, rich dishes, the free use of flesh, and even the excess of aliment, for they “increase the concupiscent excitability and sensibility of the genital organs,” which in turn slows digestion, obstructs the lungs, and floods the organs with large amounts of quickly-circulating blood (40-41). In this view, even nocturnal emissions are
hazardous; sufferers, Graham says, would be best served avoiding all stimulating foods, rising early, exercising often, sleeping on a hard bed, and taking cold baths (134).

Graham’s advocacy of dietary regulation as a tool to govern one’s urges brings light to the relationship between food and the self by making food thinkable as an agent for modifying one’s digestion and thus one’s brain and mind (6). Food consequently became, for Graham, other dietary reformers, and their followers, at once agential (“healthy” foods affect the mind/body) and subject to the eater’s agency (the eater, armed with self-knowledge, makes the choice to eat a certain way). The concept of food as opening the body to modification, in turn, enables reimagining Rose’s and Abi-Rached’s affirmative theories of bioethics in an alimentary rather than a neurological context. Those theories illuminate the ways that dietary management can be thought of as a technology of self-sculpting. Although dietary management emphasizes that the mind/body is susceptible to outside determinants in ways invisible to the scrutiny of consciousness, it also makes the individual an expert on his or her own physiology—“know thyself,” says Graham—and the ways to shape it by altering its very substance. Thinking of dietary management in the terms made available by Rose and Abi-Rached adds to the prevailing scholarship on dietary reformers the insight that following Graham’s dicta was not so much a capitulation to sexual repression as it was a way for his followers to take responsibility for being the persons they wished to be.

Rose and Abi-Rached identify the brain as the focus of “an emerging style of thought” that locates brain disorders as “encompass[ing] everything from anxiety to Alzheimer’s disease,” even “includ[ing] both addictions and obesity—all, it seems, have their origin in the brain” (14). This new style of thought asks us to think of ourselves as “somatic selves” equipped with a “neurobiological dimension to our self-understanding and our practices of self-management”
Identifying the brain as the seat of disorders previously conceptualized primarily as moral or social issues (addiction and obesity) echoes the ways that the stomach came to be understood as the site of all disease and dyspepsia the “abstract of all maladies” (Johnson 1). And just as in the early nineteenth century the stomach became a site of treatment for a variety of ills, in the twenty-first century the brain is thought of as open to a range of treatments and interventions that Rose and Abi-Rached term “neurotechnologies”: tailored pharmaceuticals, gene therapy, transcranial magnetic stimulation, etc.

Rather than attempt to depict such neurotechnologies as the horsemen of the reductivist apocalypse, as many humanists and social scientists do, Rose and Abi-Rached “seek to trace out some directions for a more affirmative relation to the new sciences of brain and mind” (2). They argue that neurotechnology construes brains as “open for intervention and improvement, malleable and plastic” rather than as destined to be or to work a certain way (223). Although some would be quick to point out (correctly) that brains being “open for intervention and improvement” means that they are made available to government and corporate influence, brains also “become open to action by each individual themselves … The plastic brain becomes a site of choice, prudence, and responsibility for each individual” (52). In this formulation, “our selves are shaped by our brains but can also shape those brains” (22). Individuals thus understand themselves as subject to unconscious influences; at the same time, their awareness of those influences and their access to the means by which to affect them (interventions such as drugs and mindfulness) means that they can exercise “choice, prudence, and responsibility” with respect to their brains (52). Rose and Abi-Rached note that “each of us is now urged to develop a reflexive understanding of the powers of these nonconscious determinants of our choices, our affections, our commitments: in doing so, we will no longer be passive subjects of those determinants, but
learn the techniques to act on them in order to live a responsible life” (22-23). In other words, neurobiological selves are encouraged to develop self-knowledge, particularly of those unconscious processes that affect their mental lives, so that they can manage those processes. Thinking of oneself as corporeal is thus not a capitulation to biological determinism but an opportunity to exercise choice about how to navigate the claims of biology.

The same commitment to shaping oneself through self-knowledge and the management of unconscious bodily processes propels Grahamian dietics. Graham’s binding of the digestive and the reproductive systems have received most of the scholarly attention directed towards him, most recently and convincingly in Kyla Wazana Tompkins’ *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (2012). But his later writings, such as *Lectures on the Science of Human Life* (1849), show Graham extending the benefits of his regimen to improved longevity, beauty, agility, stamina, resistance to disease, mental clarity, “cerebral development,” and moral sentiments (4). *Lectures*, written for the “unlearned reader,” includes a glossary of medical terms such as “hepatic” and “renal,” a feature that indicates the degree to which he takes the book’s epigraph, “Know thyself,” seriously (i). It also indicates that he seeks to make individuals experts on their selves. Arranged in the style of Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* to “refer[] continually to previously ascertained principles, or established facts and conclusions,” it begins with Graham’s understanding of the basics of physiology and builds logically to his dietary regimen (i). Graham writes it so that “every individual of suitable age and ordinary intelligence, by a proper degree of application,” can understand his or her body and maintain it (i). The underlying ethos of the *Lectures* is that the human body, being part of the natural world, is subject to fixed laws and principles, including “relations between human organic life, and the animal, vegetable, and inorganic world around us; relationships which not only greatly affect the
body, but, in the present state of being, modify mind and morals and religion to an extent which cannot safely be disregarded” (6). Because “mind and morals and religion” are subject to the human body’s conditions, only knowing oneself well enough to manage those conditions can keep them under control. The care one takes of oneself becomes ethically and theologically salient.

Graham stresses that because individuals are able to govern their alimentary selves, they are responsible for doing so: once given the tool of dietary management, they are morally responsible for their dietary choices and the aftermaths of those choices. “Excessive alimentation,” he writes, “is one of the greatest sources of evil to the human family in civic life” (258). This is a point about which he feels so strongly that he reiterates it in italics:

*every individual should, as a general rule, restrain himself to the smallest quantity, which he finds from careful investigation and enlightened experience and observation, will fully meet the alimentary wants of the vital economy of this system [the body].—knowing that whatsoever is more than this is evil! (258).*

In Graham’s model, eating too much is not only unhealthy—it is “evil” (258). Mary Peabody Mann, wife of reformer Horace Mann and one of the famous Peabody sisters, reiterates this point forcefully in her cookbook, *Christianity in the Kitchen: A Physiological Cook-Book* (1858). She writes that foods such as “wedding cake, suit plum-puddings, and rich turtle soup, are masses of indigestible material, which should never find their way to any Christian table”; she grieves to see such food eaten at weddings, for “a book of reckoning is kept for the offences of the stomach, as well as for those of the heart, and this is one of the deeds done in the body, for which the doer will be called to account” (2). She terms such indigestible food “unchristian” because “health is one of the indispensable conditions of the highest morality and beneficence” (2). Mistreating one’s stomach is to mistreat one’s temperament, making one a worse person, so one is responsible for eating healthily (2). “It is a good omen,” she writes, “that practical
physiologists, even now, begin to feel ashamed of ill health, and feel bound to apologize for it” (2-3). In a footnote, she remarks that Sylvester Graham “published an apology in the newspapers for having been sick” (3). And like Graham, she intends her work to increase its readers’ self-knowledge, for only “knowledge of physiology” will “stem the tide” of dyspepsia (162). She hopes for a future in which “every mother will be a physiologist, and all nurses [nursing women] will be physicians” (163). When that day comes, she writes, all will recognize that “[r]egimen and diet” are the keys to restoring and maintaining bodily, mental, and moral health (155).

When literary scholars focus exclusively on the politics of dietary reform, they do so at the expense of its medical context and its recuperative aims. Specifically, they miss the ways that dietary management offered nineteenth-century Americans opportunities to govern bodily processes otherwise out of their control even as they ceded control of their appetites to reformers. Although other nineteenth-century popular sciences such as phrenology, craniometry, and physiognomy assume the permanence of mental ability or temperament, dietary reformers envisioned the stomach as a site of change. Individuals were able to understand their dietary choices as choices about themselves—choices that provided the opportunity to exercise responsibility in the care of their bodies. Despite its emphasis on the stomach’s influence over the brain, dietary reform is not a science of determination but of the possibilities afforded by embodiment.

The Sins of Indigestion

In his heavily marked copy of Emerson’s Essays: First Series (1841), Melville records his humorous reaction to the transcendentalist’s claim that “Hideous dreams are exaggerations of the sins of the day”: according to Melville, Emerson means, “of course, the sins of indigestion” (132). What Emerson sees as metaphysical reckoning, Melville sees as the result of an upset
stomach. The conceptual move Melville makes in his marginal note is to put Emerson’s philosophical speculations into conversation with the body; the same, I claim, holds true for *Moby-Dick*. Just as dietary reformers insist upon the stomach as unconsciously influencing the mind, *Moby-Dick* continually returns to questions about how the manner and content of what individuals think might be affected by the manner and content of their ingestion. Specifically, the novel draws on dietary reform and its assumptions about the mind-body relationship to counter contemporary philosophical hopes of transcending the body such as those held by Emerson. In the course of doing so, it poses questions about digestion’s implications for religious belief and moral agency.

I view Melville as pushing against the American transcendentalist tendency to imagine philosophy, thought, and emotion as actuated by the disembodied mind. Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836) that “[s]tanding on the bare ground,” he feels that “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental” (6). Emerson’s famous eyeball, bereft of a body, has no identity (“I am nothing”); no physiological limitations (“I see all”); and no connections that it values over others (“[t]he name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental”). In other words, it signifies a relationship to the universe in which the body plays no part. But humans have bodies: Emerson cannot actually become a transparent eyeball, free of physical needs; a stubbed toe might have interrupted Thoreau’s metaphysical speculations in the woods. In his poem “Art,” he distinguishes “brave unbodied scheme[s]” speculated upon in “placid hours” from “unlike things” that “must meet and mate,” as in digestion, to create “pulsed life,” the stuff of art (*Poems*
Melville makes this point when he writes of the limitations of Goethe’s optimistic philosophy to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne in June of 1851:

In reading some of Goethe's sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, "Live in the all." That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one, -- good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. "My dear boy," Goethe says to him, "you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must live in the all, and then you will be happy!" (Correspondence 193-94)

Melville makes a sharp point, and it is one that will reappear in Moby-Dick: contra Goethe and “his votaries,” including Emerson, the physical body—its pains, exhilarations, and changes—punctures the hope of transcending the bounds of one’s self and partaking in universal kinship. Goethe advises us to “get out of yourself,” but few things situate us within our bodies like a toothache. In a note at the bottom of his letter, Melville adds that Goethe’s “all” feeling is not entirely without truth: one feels it, he writes, “lying in the grass on a warm summer’s day” (194). But, Melville adds, “what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion” (194). As a dyspeptic might agree, part of what makes feelings and opinions temporary is their susceptibility to changes in and to the body: how long can a body that needs to drink, eat, and excrete lie in the grass experiencing transcendence?47

If, as Stephanie Browner writes, “Melville preferred to write about the body from the ground level and to immerse his readers in spectacularly somatic worlds,” part of what makes Moby-Dick so “spectacularly somatic” is its insistence on the influence of digestion, the body’s “ground level” or fundament, on thought, emotion, and behavior (71). It has long been

47 In a February 1851 letter to Duyckinck, Melville notes that Hawthorne himself is worryingly incorporeal: “there is something lacking – a good deal lacking – to the plump sphericity of the man. What is that? – He does’nt patronize the butcher – he needs roast-beef, done rare” (181). For Melville, food—“roast-beef, done rare”—can fill the bodily lack he sees in Hawthorne.
recognized that *Moby-Dick* concerns itself with eating, digestion’s sister art: Robert T. Tally Jr.
says as much when he asserts that the novel “uses culinary rhetoric to establish its analysis of
power relations in the nineteenth century” (73). Caleb Crain links the novel’s many references to
cannibalism to homoeroticism, noting that both instances involve “unusual male-male intimacy”
(26). Mark Edelman Boren, surveying the novel’s many dining scenes, remarks that “[e]ating
and being eaten play such a large role in *Moby-Dick* that even if Ishmael doesn’t understand it,
he must acknowledge its presence” (9). And, given such memorable scenes as Ishmael and
Queequeg’s chowder feast and Stubb’s supper of near-raw whale steak, studies of eating are
more than warranted.

But focusing exclusively on eating extracts it from a historical context in which ideas
about what, when, and how to eat are inextricable from ideas about digestion. Indeed, for dietary
reformers and their adherents, attaining a healthy digestion (and thus one’s best self) was the sole
end of eating. Literary criticism that focuses on eating tends to construe it as a contained event,
but the act of eating is not in and of itself the sum total of a person’s relation to food, especially
in the antebellum context. Food is ingested and digested; it goes inside the body, and in
antebellum America, it affects that body in powerful ways. Critics’ focus on the act of eating to
the neglect of digestion accounts for their tendency to take the alimentary elements of *Moby-
Dick* not as subjects of analysis in and of themselves but as springboards by which the more
rarefied critical heights inhabited by politics and sexuality may be reached. Kyla Wazana
Tompkins’ work towards establishing “critical eating studies” is an example: it “seeks to render
discursive two kinds of matter toward which so much human appetitive energy is directed: food
and flesh” (2-3). Attending to the very real ways that food and eating overlap with social and
political forces allows for a clear view of the biopolitics of eating—and indeed attaining such a
view is one of Tompkins’ goals—but making matter “discursive” neglects digestion’s signal role in contemporary medicine and culture (Tompkins 5).

Melville, as Ralph James Savarese writes, “seems to be familiar” with contemporary theories of digestion; further, he elaborates those theories in his fiction (30). Nippers of “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1853), after all, is a “victim” of “indigestion,” a condition that, Melville writes in chorus with physicians and reformers, is “betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability” (NN Piazza Tales 16). In “Bartleby” Melville’s characterization of Nippers as dyspeptic results in him being a comically poor officemate: Nippers, eternally unsatisfied with his desk, “would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him” (17). And Melville was, at the very least, aware of the basics of Graham’s ideas. A copy of Graham’s A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity was in the library of the Charles and Henry, a whale-hunting ship aboard which Melville worked from November 1842 to April 1843 (Delbanco 44). We cannot be sure if Melville read the book, but a moment in Pierre: or, The Ambiguities (1852) indicates that he was familiar with (and skeptical toward) the Grahamian model of dietics. The young Pierre Glendinning lives in New York City with a group of Grahamists and philosophers known as the Apostles, who partake of seemingly every reform movement the city has to offer and live “huskily muttering the Kantian Categories through teeth and lips dry and dusty as any miller’s, with the crumbs of Graham crackers” (NN Pierre 300). They keep, in fact, “a bushel of Graham crackers” as some of their “only convivials” (300). Melville’s narrator inveighs against the attention they give to their diets with a specificity that indicates the author’s familiarity with not only Grahamism but also like
movements: “Nor shall all thy Pythagorean and Shellian dietings on apple-parings, dried prunes, and crumbs of oat-meal cracker, ever fit thy body for heaven” (299). Melville was not a passive recipient of others’ theories of digestion, then, but a participant in the structure of their cultural reception.

_Moby-Dick_ addresses the body and the need to govern it in its first paragraph, in which Ishmael, who finds himself growing restless with life on land, decides to “sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” as a way of “driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation” (3). Melville thus makes bodily regulation the cause of Ishmael’s adventures. The young man views sea travel as restorative to his health:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (3)

When a grim, splenetic view of the world begins to overtake Ishmael, he goes to sea. This is especially so when his “hypos” threaten to rule his actions. In antebellum America, a hypo attack meant hypochondriasis, a commonly self-diagnosed condition with symptoms equal in nebulosity to those of late-century nervous diseases such as neurasthenia and hysteria.

48 Pythagoras and Percy Bysshe Shelley were vegetarians. In 1813, Shelley published an influential pamphlet, “A Vindication of Natural Diet,” which advocates strict abstention from meat and alcohol.

49 In July 1854, Herman Melville gave his wife Elizabeth a copy of Matilda Marian Pullan’s _The Modern Housewife’s Receipt Book_ (1854) (Kelley 7). An essay written by physician J. B. Langley prefaces the guide, and in it he ties the culinary arts to healthy mental function: “We do not believe that the happiness of home depends entirely upon the cuisine, or that WOMAN is never to have higher ambition than to be food-maker to the sterner sex. Not at all. But we do believe that woman’s duties are in the domestic sphere, and that some of them refer to the material comforts without which the brain—the organ of the mind—cannot perform its functions” (qtd. in Kelley 7).
Ishmael’s use of the shorthand term “hypos” presumes that he and his reader have a shared language for the disorder, which indicates its prevalence in antebellum culture. Justine Murison characterizes hypochondriasis as causing a person to believe himself or herself an animal or an inanimate object (Murison 33). But hypochondriasis was not a singular, stable epistemic category but rather a mélange of symptoms, the causes and cures of which were topics of vigorous debate in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^{50}\) For James Johnson, hypochondriasis is a “curse of civilization” that arises when “the mind has been cultivated at the expense of the body” (63). He writes that “mental anxiety, too much exercise of the intellect, and too little exercise of the body” are the chief causes of the disease and recommends that sufferers “narrowly watch” fluctuations in their “natural temper or feelings” to alert themselves to its influence (65, 69).\(^{51}\) Some hypochondriacs, he writes, “conscious of the danger they ran, by the slightest collision or contradiction from even the nearest relations,” shunned company until their attacks wore away (72). Ishmael does much the same thing: he takes responsibility for his body by monitoring his

\(^{50}\) An anonymous review of two treatises on hypochondriasis in an 1844 issue of *The Medico-Chirurgical Review* charts an array of disagreements about the disease: James Johnson views it as originating in overstimulation of the brain, leading to a “morbid sensibility of the digestive organs”; German physician Christoph Hufeland claims that it originates in the nervous system generally and the digestive organs more particularly; William Cullen understands it as primarily a neurosis (421-23). In the midst of the controversy, though, physicians agreed that the two most common symptoms of the disorder are digestive troubles and despondency.

\(^{51}\) Melville himself was thought by friend and neighbor Sarah Morewood to suffer from “too much exercise of the intellect.” She writes in a December 1851 letter to George Duyckinck that Melville writes all day and does not “leave his room till quite dark in the evening -- when he for the first time during the whole day partakes of solid food -- he must therefore write under a state of morbid excitement which will soon injure his health” (*Melville Log* 441). Melville, then, was thought to be something of a dyspeptic himself.
moods and relying on his “strong moral principle” to stay violence (3). When he feels the “damp, drizzly November” in his soul, he goes to sea as soon as he can, not only because he relishes “being paid” for his labor but also “because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck” that can reverse the adverse effects of hypochondriasis (6). The passage thus illuminates the cultural aspects of hypochondriasis, which are predicated, for both Ishmael and Johnson, on regimes of self-observation and self-restraint.

Going to sea, for Ishmael, is an attempt to cure a disorder both corporeal and moral in nature. Rush writes that while hypochondriasis is “seated in the mind,” it “is as much the effect of corporeal causes as a pleurisy, or a bilious fever” (10). Ishmael’s wish to “regulat[e] the circulation” as a way of curing his hypos suggests that he believes as much. But he also sees hypochondriasis as a moral disorder: when his hypos are strongest, “it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off” (3). When his body is not fully under conscious control, it causes him to wish to act in ways that are morally dubious—here, knocking others’ hats off. This echoes Mann’s emphasis on maintaining health as a way of maintaining one’s good temperament: retaining full moral agency requires a healthy, properly regulated body. Ishmael goes to sea not only for his health but also for his soul; further, he takes care of his soul precisely by taking care of his health. Yet whether his time on the Pequod alleviates his indigestion is an open question, for his narration wavers between, on one hand, a dyspeptic character—irritable, mutable, reactive—and, on the other, the sort of ironclad digestive capabilities he attributes to hyenas:

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52 Rush also notes that “persons who are afflicted with it [hypochondriasis] are said to be spleeny, in some parts of the New England states” (12). James Emmett Ryan, in an incisive study of illness and healing in Moby-Dick, argues that Ishmael is a hypochondriac, noting that his hypos “figure as commonplace symptoms within nineteenth-century medical theory” (33).
“He [the hyena-like man] bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker” (226).

Ishmael here makes the connection between cognition and digestion clear—both are ways of understanding one’s relation to the environment. To have the digestion of a hyena or an ostrich is to be able to maintain one’s equanimity in the face of “small difficulties and … peril of life and limb” alike (226). His avid narration, like the ostrich, attempts to “bolt[] down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible,” but the novel, capacious as it is, can only stomach so much—Ishmael’s acidic, ulcerative digressions mark the consequent dyspepsia.

The Try Pots, where Ishmael and Queequeg lodge before their journey on the Pequod, is the site of much of the novel’s early engagement with food and digestion. The famous chowder scene figures food’s agency by invoking its power to affect whatever ingests it. The sentence describing the clam chowder served to Ishmael and Queequeg at the Try Pots makes the dish’s appeal clear: “It was made of small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded ship biscuits, and salted pork cut up into little flakes; the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and salt” (66-67). The friends consume their supper “with great expedition,” and soon Ishmael orders a round of chowder made with cod rather than clams (67). It is while attending to this second bowl that Ishmael wonders whether chowder might affect the head. His question indicates an awareness that contemporary physicians and dietary reformers would balk at the rapid consumption of a great quantity of rich, hot food—Melville thus structures the chowder scene as a site of engagement with dietary reform. Sylvester Graham inveighed against soups in general; they are “altogether too complicated to be healthy” (Lectures
He writes that “a dish of salted or smoked fish, broiled and perfectly saturated with butter, and perhaps also dressed with mustard and pepper,” a dish much like chowder, “is enough to give a hyena a fit of dyspepsy” (223-24). Ishmael describing his meal in a way that makes it sound irresistible—“Oh, sweet friends! hearken to me,” he says before describing it—brings to attention the tension inherent in dietary reform between what is healthy and what tastes good. And though Philip warned against pleasing the “palate at the expense of the stomach,” Ishmael has a second bowl of chowder (Philip 133).

Ishmael might look to the structure and surroundings of the Try Pots itself, the “[f]ishiest of all fishy places,” for evidence of food’s potency:

Chowder for breakfast, and chowder for dinner, and chowder for supper, till you began to look for fish-bones coming through your clothes. The area before the house was paved with clam-shells. Mrs. Hussey wore a polished necklace of codfish vertebra; and Hosea Hussey had his account books bound in superior old shark-skin. There was a fishy flavor to the milk, too, which I could not at all account for, till one morning happening to take a stroll along the beach among some fishermen's boats, I saw Hosea's brindled cow feeding on fish remnants, and marching along the sand with each foot in a cod's decapitated head, looking very slipshod, I assure ye. (67)

In this passage, the Try Pots’ kitchen, which continuously transforms fish into chowder, acts as the stomach of its environs, spreading fishiness to human, animal, and object alike. Eating fish for every meal makes one fishy, as Hosea’s cow demonstrates, literalizing epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s mantra, “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.” The passage thus dramatizes dietary reformers’ dismantling of the ontological distinction between eaten and eater (a distinction absent from Queequeg’s cannibalistic dietary practices). That is why Ishmael imagines fish-bones poking through his clothing: because he eats chowder for every meal, his body becomes fishy. And because food’s psychological effects are coterminous with its effects on the eater’s body, Ishmael’s (or is it Fishmael’s?) question of whether the chowder has affected his head is bound to the question of whether it has changed his body.
Ishmael’s and Queequeg’s relationship, forged while searching for a whaling ship in Nantucket, is marked by Ishmael’s anthropological interest in Queequeg’s cultural differences from white New Englanders. Those differences extend to different habits and beliefs regarding food. Queequeg “never consorted at all, or but very little,” with other sailors; instead, to Ishmael’s eye exhibiting a “Socratic wisdom,” the harpooner “seemed entirely at his ease; preserving the utmost serenity; content with his own companionship; always equal to himself” (50). “Surely,” Ishmael asserts, “this was a touch of fine philosophy; though no doubt he had never heard there was such a thing as that” (50). Ishmael thinks of Queequeg, who seems to live philosophically without being trained for it, as a born philosopher. He finds this far preferable to the typical philosopher, of whom “I conclude that, like the dyspeptic old woman, he must have ‘broken his digester’” (50). For Ishmael, philosophy as it is typically practiced is a product of poor digestion; it follows that Queequeg, whose mind is impervious to the debilitating effects of dyspepsia, is a different type of philosopher, one not “conscious of so [philosophically] living” (50). Early on, then, Melville takes care to align digestion (or rather, indigestion) not only with what Ishmael sees as Queequeg’s personal philosophy but also with philosophy in general: Queequeg’s healthful digestion makes him a harpoon-flinging Socrates, while the common breed of philosophers must have disordered stomachs. As Melville’s responses to Goethe and Emerson suggest, he meditates on the body’s ability to challenge philosophical perspectives that neglect its role in thought and knowledge. To call philosophy the result of a “broken digester” is to subordinate it and its traditional practitioners not to rational argumentation but to the body’s vagaries.

Ishmael’s characterization of Queequeg as a natural-born philosopher hints at civilized / uncivilized differences in digestion, a subject that I will address in detail later in the chapter.
Here, Ishmael’s conception of differences in digestion inheres in the differences between his dyspeptic mood swings and morbid introspections and Queequeg’s calm self-assurance. Johnson wrote that indigestion is a “curse of civilization” that can arise from overexertion of the mind at the cost of the body, which explains why philosophers have “broken digesters”; if Ishmael goes to sea to treat his dyspepsia, part of what he seeks from his journey is a shift away from the sort of mental taxation that, per Johnson, burdens intellectuals with indigestion (63). Ishmael thinks that Queequeg, who lives philosophy rather than thinks it, is not subject to the “curse of civilization” because, in the young man’s view, he is not civilized. Queequeg, for Ishmael, is a member of a natural aristocracy whose very lack of civilization equips him with the cool-headedness and equanimity that dietary reformers sought to attain.

Ishmael construes not only philosophy but also religion as subject to the influence of digestion. After a day spent searching for work, Ishmael returns to his and Queequeg’s shared room to find the harpooner silently sitting with a carven idol, Yojo, on his head (83). To his roommate’s alarm, he holds the position for a full day. At the end of Queequeg’s religious observance, Ishmael decides to educate him on the history of religion, “beginning with the rise and progress of the primitive religions, and coming down to the various religions of the present time, during which time I labored to show Queequeg that all these Lents, Ramadans, and prolonged ham-squatting in cold, cheerless rooms were stark nonsense” (85). These practices are “bad for the health; useless for the soul; opposed, in short, to the obvious laws of Hygiene and common sense” (85). Fasting is central to Lent and Ramadan, and Queequeg takes no food

53 Dietary reformers’ identification of “civilized” eating practices as causing digestive troubles precedes current-day attitudes about purportedly more “natural” ways of eating, e.g. “paleo” regimes that seek to replicate prehistorical humans’ diets, strictures against processed foods, and locavorism.
during his worship, so it is most likely fasting that’s “bad for the health” and “opposed … to the obvious laws of Hygiene.”

Ishmael then delivers to Queequeg an extended monologue on fasting and religion:
Besides, argued I, fasting makes the body cave in; hence the spirit caves in; and all thoughts born of a fast must necessarily be half-starved. This is the reason why most dyspeptic religionists cherish such melancholy notions about their hereafters. In one word, Queequeg, said I, rather digressively; hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling; and since then perpetuated through the hereditary dyspepsias nurtured by Ramadans. (85)

Here, Ishmael explicitly binds body to spirit: if “fasting makes the body cave in,” then it necessarily does the same to the spirit (85). If, as Orson Fowler asserts, food becomes mind and soul, then “all thoughts born of a fast must necessarily be half-starved.” Ishmael thus understands religious belief as something intrinsically tied to adherents’ digestion (or, in the case of fasting, lack thereof): hell is not the punishment of a just God but the product of the dyspeptic’s disordered mind.

I read Ishmael’s monologue as reflecting his own indigestion. It is rude and presumptuous, if not ill-tempered; it is the philosophizing of someone with a broken digester, which means that we should not take what Ishmael says without a grain of salt. When he finishes his lecture, he asks Queequeg about his digestion: the harpooner responds that his only incidence of dyspepsia was after a feast of fifty of his kingdom’s enemies (85). His friend declines to hear any more. Melville’s willingness to make this joke suggests that we not take Ishmael’s professed views on digestion to be the same as his. But, as Samuel Otter writes, Melville “does not reject the idea of the body as meaningful” even though his work at times critiques contemporary American culture’s obsession with phrenology, physiognomy, and other modes of reading the body (154). Indeed, the early chapters of Moby-Dick engage digestion in ways informed by contemporary physicians and dietary reformers. What Melville adds, as I have argued, is an
exploration of digestion’s effects: the early chapters of Moby-Dick consider how both philosophy and religion are inflected by the stomachs (and thus the psychological states) of thinkers and believers.

**Stomachs and Sharks**

Ishmael’s conversation with Queequeg indicates Melville’s interest in tracing digestion as it moves across racial and cultural lines. I argue that this tracing ultimately expresses the futility of racing bodies’ interiors. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins has amply demonstrated, food, eating, and digestion were central to how white nineteenth-century Americans viewed the black body. The “performative production” of race, she writes, depended on an alimentary dialectic (7). On one hand, black bodies were commonly construed not just as commodities, but as edible commodities—see, for example, the Jim Crow-shaped sweets Hepzibah sells in her shop in Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables (1851).54 On the other hand, black Americans were understood to be prodigious consumers, as pervasive stereotypes about their purportedly insatiable appetite for watermelons and sweets of all sorts attest.55 Here, I argue that Moby-Dick undermines notions of racial differences by posing one’s capacities for self-control, not race, as driving what and how one eats.

54 Hepzibah also gives a boy a gingerbread whale inspired by Moby-Dick.

55 Tompkins concludes that in Graham’s dietics “correct eating, like correct sexual behavior, is understood as a performative act of national identification and formation. In eating as national subjects flesh is called into social being through a model that understands race as anchored” to digestion (85). But her claim that “correct eating” is an act of “national identification and formation” rests on her argument that Sylvester Graham characterizes “foods that constitute a threat to the body” as “‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’ to the United States (spices, coffee, sugar, tea, and wine),” which is not accurate (81). Graham inveighs equally against such domestic products as whiskey and butter.
I begin my analysis of race and digestion in *Moby-Dick* by pairing two often-paired dining scenes, both depicted in Chapter 34, “The Cabin-Table”: the officers’ dinner and the harpooners’ dinner. Every aspect of the officers’ dinner is choreographed and restrained. They depart from the deck to the cabin in order of rank: first Ahab descends, then Starbuck, then Stubb, and then Flask. Ishmael notes that the absolute deference given to the ship’s captain at mealtimes is linked to the “unchallenged power” of “he who in the rightly regal and intelligent spirit presides over his own private dinner-table of invited guests.” “Who has but once dined his friends,” Ishmael avers, “has tasted what it is to be Caesar” (150). The officers are served in total silence according to rank: Starbuck “received his meat as though receiving alms; and cut it tenderly; and a little started if, perchance, the knife grazed against the plate; and chewed it noiselessly, and swallowed it, not without circumspection” (150-51).

While all of the officers observe the table’s traditional silence, one seems to find it stifling: “What a relief it was to choking Stubb, when a rat made a sudden racket in the hold below” (151). Why does Stubb choke when Starbuck, in harmony with both *Pequod* tradition and contemporary dietary discourse, swallows his food carefully, “not without circumspection” (151)? Put another way, what is it that Stubb has trouble swallowing? The readiest answer, of course, is that he chokes on the parching salted beef served by Dough-Boy, the ships’ steward. Stubb’s being so relieved at the sound of a stowaway rat leads me to propose a different answer: he chokes on the cabin’s restrained, restraining quiet, for it cannot accommodate his capacious appetite. He might be more comfortable dining with the harpooners, who eat in lively “contrast to the hardly tolerable constraint and nameless invisible domineerings of the captain’s table” (152). Their table is characterized by “almost frantic democracy” and “entire care-free license and ease”: 
While their masters, the mates, seemed afraid of the sound of the hinges of their own jaws, the harpooneers chewed their food with such a relish that there was a report to it. They dined like lords; they filled their bellies like Indian ships all day loading with spices. Such portentous appetites had Queequeg and Tashtego, that to fill out the vacancies made by the previous repast, often the pale Dough-Boy was fain to bring on a great baron of salt-junk, seemingly quarried out of the solid ox. (152)

The harpooners break every rule in the dining book. They eat so loudly that the noise echoes, and, contrary to prevailing Anglo-American thought on digestion, they stuff (not sculpt) themselves. The simile Melville uses to describe their hunger, “they filled their bellies like Indian ships all day loading with spices,” toys with the dangers associated with spiced foods in general, but especially with the fiery Indian foods that were popular with sailors in Melville’s time.56

Contemporary physicians and dietary reformers might have thought that eating with such speed and immoderation would lead to nervous debility, but, as Ishmael discovers early in his friendship with Queequeg, dyspepsia is not a universal complaint. In fact, the only one whose health seems affected by the harpooners’ dinner is Dough-Boy, worried that he himself might be eaten:

[Dough-Boy] was naturally a very nervous, shuddering sort of little fellow, this bread-faced steward; the progeny of a bankrupt baker and a hospital nurse. And what with the standing spectacle of the black terrific Ahab, and the periodical tumultuous visitations of these three savages, Dough-Boy's whole life was one continual lip-quiver. Commonly, after seeing the harpooneers furnished with all things they demanded, he would escape from their clutches into his little pantry adjoining, and fearfully peep out at them through the blinds of its door, till all was over. (151)

If the harpooners are ships loaded with spices, then Dough-Boy is just what his name suggests: soft, bland bread dough. Ishmael’s description of him as both “bread-faced” and perpetually

56 In Lectures on the Science of Human Life, Sylvester Graham praises “Hindostan and India generally” for their vegetarian diets; he condemns, however, their taste for “curry powder—a composition made of cayenne pepper, black pepper, ginger, mustard, and several other ingredients of a very heating and irritating character, calculated to produce the worst disorders of the alimentary canal” (178).
nervous—his “whole life was one continual lip-quiver”—marks his role as the living intersection of food and health as surely as his heritage as “the progeny of a bankrupt baker and a hospital nurse.” When the harpooners eat in ways considered hazardous by prevailing medical thought, only the glutinous Dough-Boy suffers.

The stark differences between the quiet and restraint of the officers’ meal and the “frantic democracy” of the harpooners’ seem to reinforce Ishmael’s ideas about racial differences in digestion: whites’ digestive systems are suited for eating in moderation, while other races’ systems drive them to ravenous consumption. But that reading overlooks the ways that the diners act in ways contrary to this idea. Although Stubb is third in command, he seems as if he would be happier eating with the harpooners than with the officers. And Daggoo, the “great negro” harpooner, runs counter to stereotypes about black eating by taking considered, “dainty” bites of his food, seeming to Ishmael to subsist mostly on air alone (152). These details indicate that there are no particularly white or nonwhite ways of eating—self-control and moderation, for dietary reformers the hallmarks of civilization, are available to all. To analyze the conceptual tensions in the dining scenes, I now turn to Chapter 64, “Stubb’s Supper,” which depicts Fleece’s sermon to the sharks, whose frenzied, noisy feast echoes the harpooners’ dinner. Drawing on my analysis of the crew’s dinners, I argue that despite the similarity of the harpooners’ dinner to the sharks’, it does not follow to read that similarity as expressing the animality and ravenousness of nonwhite, “uncivilized” bodies. Doing so unnecessarily homogenizes the harpooners and ignores the sharkishness of white men like Stubb, who, as Fleece notes, is “more of shark dan Massa Shark hisself” (297). Sharkishness—eating ravenously, with no governance of one’s appetite—thus transcends race and culture. Joined in their sharkishness by rejecting “healthy” dining habits
en masse internationale, Stubb and the harpooners figure the failure of looking to digestion for racial meaning.

After Stubb kills a whale, the crew fastens it to the ship’s side so that its oil can be harvested. Stubb, “flushed with conquest,” demands that a steak be cut from the whale’s “small,” or “the tapering extremity of the body,” for, being “a high liver,” he is “somewhat intemperately fond of the whale as a flavorish thing to his palate” (292). The word “intemperately” invokes the all-important dietary concept of temperance—“simplicity and temperance in diet,” Graham writes, is paramount—a concept that high-living Stubb rejects (Lectures 141). As he settles “at the capstan-head, as if that capstan were a sideboard” to eat, he is joined in his meal by “thousands on thousands of sharks,” “[m]ingling their mumblings with his own mastications” in a fractious feast that mirrors not only Stubb’s eating but also the harpooners’ own “frenzied democracy” at table (293). The rest of the chapter returns to the linked images of Stubb’s dining and the sharks’ repeatedly. He is not aware of their similarities at first: he “heeded not the mumblings of the banquet that was going on so nigh him, no more than the sharks heeded the smacking of his own epicurean lips” (293). When he calls the black cook Fleece over to castigate him for the steak being too cooked and tender, though, he draws the connection. A good whale steak “must be tough,” he says: “those sharks now over the side, don’t you see they prefer it tough and rare?” (294). He seems to align himself with the sharks because of their shared taste for tough, rare whale meat. But then he tells Fleece to “tell ‘em they are welcome to help themselves civilly, and in moderation, but they must keep quiet” (294). “Go,” he says, “and preach to ‘em!” (294). That he couches the advice to eat “civilly, and in moderation,” something he struggles to do, as preaching suggests that he views dietary reformers as evangelical; and, as
we have seen, he does not care for their message. Telling Fleece to preach to the sharks is a way of sarcastically telling him to proselytize them into the digestive fold, an absurd and impossible task that in its absurdity and impossibility indicates Stubb’s frustration with digestion reform.

Fleece takes the injunction to “preach” literally and, addressing the bloody waters below, sermonizes the sharks:

Your woraciousness, fellow-critters, I don't blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can't be helped; but to gobern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint. You is sharks, sartin; but if you gobern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well goberned. Now, look here, bred'ren, just try wonst to be cibil, a helping yourselbs from dat whale. (295)

The sharks cannot help their sharkishness, for “dat is natur, and can’t be helped” (295). The point, Fleece emphasizes, is to govern one’s own nature and so govern one’s voraciousness. That is, by now, a familiar theme: the call to govern one’s appetite, to eat moderately, is the central doctrine of midcentury dietary reform. Just as Graham and his adherents found virtue, freedom, and agency by managing their diets, in Fleece’s sermon being in control of one’s appetite leads to the moral and spiritual purity of the angels. But Fleece has a suspect congregation. Throughout the sermon, though, Stubb “help[s] himself freely” to his steak, a signal that he does not take the homily seriously, and the sharks continue to gnaw the whale and each other (296).

Fleece soon grows tired of sermonizing a congregation deaf to his lessons: “No use goin' on; de dam willains will keep a scougin' and slappin' each oder, Massa Stubb; dey don't hear one word” (296). Stubb does not appear to hear, either: as he turns to excoriate Fleece for cooking his steak

Later, Queequeg falls into the water; after he is hauled back aboard, Dough-Boy hands him a cup of ginger and water instead of spirits (321). Stubb is incredulous: “Ginger? ginger? and will you have the goodness to tell me, Mr. Dough-Boy, where lies the virtue of ginger? Ginger! is ginger the sort of fuel you use, Dough-Boy, to kindle a fire in this shivering cannibal? … There is some sneaking Temperance Society movement about this business” (322).
too much, he does so while “rapidly bolting” whale meat into his mouth (296). At the end of the chapter, Fleece concludes that he is “more of shark dan Massa Shark hisself” (297).\footnote{This is a sentiment the narrator of Typee echoes (1846): “The fiendlike skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing engines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth” (125).}

Though the harpooners’ and officers’ dining scenes appear at first to posit racial differences in eating and digestion, the bottomless hunger and enthusiastic consumption characteristic of sharks cross racial lines. As Fleece’s sermon suggests, what is at stake in one’s sharkishness is not so much race as self-governance. But careful attention to one’s intake is not without its difficulties: just as asking sharks to practice temperance and eat “civilly, and in moderation” is absurd, it is absurd to ask Stubb, Queequeg, and Tashtego to adhere to Grahamian dietary rules. Captain Peleg says before the voyage that “Pious harpooners never make good voyagers—it takes the shark out of ‘em; no harpooner is worth a straw who ain’t pretty sharkish” (89). His fear is that they will become too concerned for their souls to risk their lives hunting whales, a fear that is to some extent borne out in Starbuck, the well-governed shark who contemplates derailing Ahab’s hunt for Moby Dick. Ultimately, though, the business of the Pequod and the whale fishery more generally depends upon the ferocity of men like Stubb and Queequeg; to expect them to sit and dine as if they were at Sylvester Graham’s table is as absurd as preaching to swarming sharks.

\textbf{Vengeance on a Dumb Brute}

Much like Stubb and the sharks, Moby Dick is characterized by his consumption. When Ishmael signs up to work on the Pequod, he soon learns that the White Whale “devoured, chewed up, crunched” Ahab’s leg on his last voyage (79). Especially irksome to Ahab is what appears to be “the White Whale’s infernal aforethought of ferocity”; for those who hunt him,
“every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent” (183-84). Ahab hates Moby Dick not because he ate his leg but because he perceives the animal as doing so purposefully. For him, the whale is either a moral agent himself or an instrument of another agent, be it fate or divinity. This means that the loss of his leg appears to him not an accident but a crime; this distinction provides moral justification for his quest for revenge. Starbuck, Ahab’s Quaker first mate, recoils from thinking of the whale as an agent: “Vengeance on a dumb brute!” he cries, “that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous” (163-64). Starbuck understands Moby Dick as an animal that acts from “blindest instinct” rather than from deliberation, so it cannot be a moral agent or, consequently, a target of revenge.

Attending to digestion in *Moby-Dick* leads, perhaps surprisingly, to a question not frequently asked: what drives the whale? As I will suggest, the novel poses indigestion as one potential cause of Moby Dick’s “inscrutable malice” (164). Ishmael portrays whales’ indigestion as a double-edged sword. One edge is its economic value: Ishmael tells us that ambergris, the most commercially valuable substance produced by a whale’s body, “is supposed by some to be the cause, and by others the effect,” of cetacean dyspepsia (408). “Who would think,” he crows, “that such fine ladies and gentlemen should regale themselves with an essence found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale!” (408). Laxatives were a common mode of relieving dyspepsia in the mid-nineteenth century; Ishmael therefore proposes, as a way of curing whales’ dyspepsia, ramming “three or four” boatloads of laxatives down their throats, “and then running out of harm’s way, as laborers do in blasting rocks” (409). Though he obviously delights in his

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59 Melville draws this striking image from Henry Theodore Cheever, who remarks that ambergris is formed from “that state of the system which calls for a cathartic” (115). “A peck of Morrison’s
bathroom humor, Ishmael cautions against turning up our noses at ambergris because of its intestinal origins: “Bethink thee of that saying of St. Paul in Corinthians, about corruption and incorruption; how that we are sown in dishonor, but raised in glory.” (409). Ishmael aligns the Pauline relationship between corruption and incorruption with that between sweet ambergris and indigestion. The point he wishes to make is that purity can arise from foulness.

But the novel also depicts a darker, more dangerous effect of whales’ dyspepsia: indigestion produces not only ambergris but also rage and violence. When the Pequod meets the Samuel Enderby, an English whaling ship, readers meet Captain Boomer, who lost his arm to Moby Dick the previous whaling season—though the whale did not swallow it, he injured it enough to require amputation (440). Unlike Ahab, Boomer seems to bear the whale no ill will (“he’s best let alone”) and maintains a cheerful perspective on life (441). Present during Boomer and Ahab’s conversation is the Samuel Enderby’s straight-laced surgeon, Dr. Bunger, whom Boomer ribs for his “dietetically severe” course of treatment after being wounded in the struggle with Moby Dick (439). Bunger, not only a physician but also “late of the reverend clergy,” draws on a mixture of science and religion to explain the White Whale’s violence:

"Well, then," interrupted Bunger, "give him your left arm for bait to get the right. Do you know, gentlemen"—very gravely and mathematically bowing to each Captain in succession—"Do you know, gentlemen, that the digestive organs of the whale are so inscrutably constructed by Divine Providence, that it is quite impossible for him to completely digest even a man's arm? And he knows it too. So that what you take for the White Whale's malice is only his awkwardness. For he never means to swallow a single limb; he only thinks to terrify by feints.” (441)

or Brandreth’s pills,” he writes, “would probably remove obstructions in the creature’s abdominal viscera” (115).

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60 See 1 Corinthians 15: 42-45.
The physician, whose interest in regulating his captain’s diet echoes that of physicians such as Philip and Johnson, holds that whales’ divinely constructed digestive systems are such that they cannot digest human limbs. This physiological premise leads him to contradict Ahab’s conception of the whale as a moral agent acting with malice; in his view, far from being malicious, the whale suffers from indigestion (441). And whereas humans can treat their dyspepsia, whales must take the preventative route: they rely on their knowledge (says Bunger) that they cannot digest human limbs to avoid dyspepsia. Moby Dick, to whom the culture of dietary reform is not accessible, cannot exercise the sort of agency-creating self-regulation that Ishmael practices.\(^{61}\)

The novel teeters on rendering Bunger’s explanation ridiculous by immediately following it with the doctor’s tale of “the old juggling fellow … that making believe swallow jack-knives, once upon a time let one drop into him in good earnest, and there it stayed for a twelvemonth or more; when I gave him an emetic, and he heaved it up in small tacks” (441). This story implies that Bunger is a less than honest or a less than competent physician, which means that his ideas about Moby Dick’s digestion might be just humbug. But answering the question of whether the White Whale has indigestion is less important than the question itself. Echoing Melville’s comic reduction of Emerson’s “sins of the day” to “the sins of indigestion,” the gam on the *Enderby* poses an encounter between the novel’s grandest concepts—fate, God, madness, vengeance—and a whale’s upset stomach.

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\(^{61}\) Ishmael notes that whales are able to maintain their internal temperatures: “Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter’s, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own” (307). Yet the question raised by Bunger is whether the whale can regain its physiological equilibrium once it has been disturbed.
This is not to say that indigestion is the only road the novel takes into the whale’s interior, as Ishmael’s attempts to read his body phrenologically and physiognomically attest. Though these attempts ultimately fail to provide the answers Ishmael seeks, rather than declare the task impossible he challenges others to try their hand: “I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can” (347). Samuel Otter notes that Ishmael’s efforts at knowing the whale delve ever deeper into its body, from the skin-deep sciences of dermatology and physiognomy to the depth of the spine (155). Looking to the depths of the stomach as one among many avenues that provide partial, imperfect views of the whale’s mind, with the aid of Bunger’s diagnosis, brings the opening chapters’ evident interest in the ties between digestion, philosophy, and religion full circle. If the whale’s violence is due to dyspepsia, then Ahab’s “blasphemous” desire for revenge seems even more so: not only does he wish to hunt an unreasoning animal, but one that acts as he does because of sickness. And a dyspeptic Moby Dick would be much like Ishmael himself: afflicted with illness, the whale would be driven to enact the cetacean equivalent of “deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off” by wreaking terrific violence on the ships that hunt him (3). Unlike Ishmael, however, he would have no “strong moral principle” or medical culture to ward off the urge to do violence (3). Finally, if the whale is dyspeptic, then Moby-Dick would be a story not just about the fatal consequences of Ahab’s cosmic insanity—itself a bodily madness, given that it is the blending of “his torn body and gashed soul” that “made him mad”—but also those of the whale’s illness (185). True to form, though, the novel refuses to allow this conclusion to stand on unshakeable ground: Bunger’s explanation is, at best, a guess.

Moby-Dick’s weaving of the animal’s violence into the larger fabric of digestion asks us to reconsider the place of food and the body in Moby-Dick. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., dean of
nineteenth-century American letters and noted physician, writes in “The Physiology of Versification” (1875) that we are ruled by bodily processes barely noticeable at the conscious level:

We are governed in our apparently voluntary actions by impulses derived from many obscure sources which act upon us almost without our cognizance. The digestive system legislates largely for our habits, bodily and mental, and its condition has no insignificant effect upon our intellectual and spiritual states. We are commanded to a considerable extent by our idiosyncrasies and infirmities. The secret of our diversities as social beings lies far more in our peptic capacities, in our indifferance to exposure or liability to suffer from it, in our sensibility to cold and head or to the air of ill-ventilated rooms, in the varying amount of sleep we require… than our friends who call us good companions or otherwise are always ready to believe. (6)

Holmes makes two points here: one is that “obscure” bodily processes play outsize roles in who we are and what we do. The rest of the article goes on to identify respiration and the pulse, both “preeminently distinguished by their rhythmical character,” as central to writing and enjoying poetry (6). His other, less emphasized point is that those who know us, not to mention we ourselves, might be less than ready to admit our bodies’ influence over us. Dietary reform discourses offered answers to questions about how to manage involuntary bodily impulses and even prevent madness, yet what remained unanswered was the question of how to address the sorts of physiological “idiosyncrasies and infirmities” unaffected by diet—especially, as Chapter 4 argues Holmes’s fiction makes clear, those idiosyncrasies that came to be known as heredity.

A Very Long Night’s Digestion

Early reviewers of Moby-Dick found the novel a riotously spiced, hard-to-digest dish. A November 1851 review in the New York Albion says that it “is having oil, mustard, vinegar, and pepper served up as a dish, in place of being scientifically administered sauce-wise” (qtd. in Selby 29). The reviewer imagines the greasy, piquant combination of fatty and fiery ingredients as served by themselves like a sort of stomach-roiling soup. It would be better, the reviewer
implies, to turn to science to find ways to dull its sharp flavors and serve it as a sauce instead.

Another November 1851 review in *Bell’s New Weekly Messenger* notes that some might enjoy the novel’s spice:

> There are people who delight in mulligatawny. They love curry at its warmest point. Ginger can not be too hot in the mouth for them. Such people, we should think, constitute the admirers of Herman Melville. He spices up his narrative with uncommon courage, and works up a story amazingly. If you love heroics and horrors he is your man. Sit down with him on a winter’s eve, and you’ll find yourself calling for candles before the night sets in. … You will have supper for a very long night’s digestion.” (qtd. in Selby 29)

A mulligatawny is a spicy English soup derived from an Indian sauce—the reviewer perceives, then, the appeal of *Moby-Dick*’s ecumenical makeup and sharp, pungent flavors. How it sits depends on the reader’s own digestion.
CHAPTER FOUR: TRICKS OF THE BLOOD: HEREDITY, CALVINISM, AND THE LIMITS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

Well, we doctors see so much of families, how the tricks of the blood keep breaking out, just as much in character as they do in looks, that we can't help feeling as if a great many people hadn't a fair chance to be what is called “good,” and that there isn't a text in the Bible better worth keeping always in mind than that one, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.
*Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (*Works* V: 324)

Midcentury dietary reformers envisioned the body/mind as malleable and subject to individual governance, a vision that promised, as I argue *Moby-Dick* makes clear, to place the management of one’s biological processes at the center of one’s moral life. Yet moral questions remained about those processes that are outside the control of the individual, especially, as this chapter argues, the biological processes that comprise heredity. Five years before he published his thoughts on digestion’s influence on bodily habits, physician, poet, and novelist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. gave an address on unconscious thought, or “Mechanism in Thought and Morals,” to Harvard University’s Phi Beta Kappa Society on June 28, 1870. In the speech Holmes expounds upon what he calls “the true mechanical relations of the thinking principle,” including “a few hints as to the false mechanical relations which have intruded themselves into the sphere of moral self-determination” (*Works* VIII: 261). He draws on an ecumenical mix of thinkers, including John Stuart Mill, Gottfried Leibniz, and physiologists Thomas Laycock and Henry Maudsley, to conclude that “[t]he more we examine the mechanism of thought, the more we shall see that the automatic, unconscious action of the mind enters largely into all its processes” (284-85). By this he means that our conscious thoughts, the “stepping-stones” that are
our “definite,” coherent, seemingly discrete mental concepts, are in fact connected by some "creating spirit" invisible to consciousness (285). This spirit, the mechanism of thought, he writes, is an “internal movement, of which we are wholly unconscious, and which we only know by its effect” (285). As he asserts in “The Physiology of Versification,” thoughts that appear to be willed and voluntary are made possible by—and are, in some cases, determined by—unperceivable mental machinery. At the same time, Holmes says, we still feel as if we are self-determining; though we might accept determinism intellectually, few “accept it as an article of faith” (303). Even Thomas Henry Huxley, “who throws quite as much responsibility on protoplasm as it will bear,” agrees that volition plays a role in thought and behavior (303).

Although Holmes accepts biological determinants of thought as a fact of nature, he regards “outside influences, whether it work with the logic of Edwards, or the averages of Buckle; whether it come in the shape of the Greek’s destiny, or the Mahometan’s fatalism” as artificial constructs that warp morality (303). Thinking of persons as morally subject to external mechanisms, he explains, leads to the “[m]oral chaos” of “transmissible responsibility”; though it seems obvious that “every moral act, depending as it does on choice, is in its nature exclusively personal,” certain moral and theological schemes—in a footnote, he names Catholicism and Calvinism—still envision responsibility as transferable from one person to another (303-04). He means that both Christian sects, otherwise separated by unbridgeable dogmatic gulfs, subscribe to the doctrine of original sin, according to which Adam’s guilt transfers to his descendants. Such a doctrine, he writes, materializes morality far more than even someone like Huxley because it makes responsibility like an object that one person can hand to another: this is nonsensical, he says, because any “mal-volition” is “inseparably involved with an interior

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condition” or mental state particular to the individual and thus cannot be rendered external and transferable (304). To thus transfer responsibility is as absurd, Holmes asserts, as “tak[ing] the dimensions of virtue by triangulation” or speaking of “the specific gravity of truth, or the square root of honesty” (304). But if responsibility were a matter of mathematics, then “[t]he misfortune of perverse instincts, which adhere to us as congenital inheritances, should go to our side of the account” (304-05). A person whose nature inclines him or her towards wickedness is not to be condemned but shown mercy. Even God, Holmes says, should respect an individual’s right not to “suffer for any thing except our own wrong-doing”; else, “there is an end to all moral relations between them” (305). In other words, Holmes puts forward the bold argument that a just God would not hold Adam and Eve’s descendents responsible for their ancestors’ sins.

In this chapter I explore the relationship among the terms of “Mechanism in Thought and Morals”—morality, theology, and heredity—in Holmes’s first two novels, Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny (1861) and The Guardian Angel (1867). I argue that these works’ use of heredity (understood in biological terms) to critique original sin illuminates the conditions under which heredity became thinkable as a way to address ethical and theological issues. I claim that Holmes’s novels, written on the cusp of the Darwinian revolution, attempt to address how biological heredity might mitigate moral responsibility; further, I argue that this attempt makes possible a set of ways of thinking about descent, destiny, and morality later used by eugenicists, although Holmes had no commitment to the cultural or political aims of the eugenicists themselves. In his attempt to absolve individuals driven by their heredity to vice, he implicitly suggests that others should assume responsibility for them, opening the door to imagining inheritors of less desirable traits as best managed by a supposed hereditary elite. But Holmes differs from eugenicists, I argue, in two respects: first, he addresses unwanted or dangerous
inherited tendencies as treatable rather than immutable parts of a person’s being; second, he
deals with such tendencies as the province of the community and individual rather than the state.
Holmes thus understands heredity as powerful enough an influence that it limits human
responsibility but not so powerful that it cannot be treated. By displacing the heredity of original
sin with the heredity of biological science, Holmes articulates a view of inheritance that allows
for the amelioration of transmitted traits—giving form to a pliable heredity historically and
conceptually situated between the twin hereditary determinisms of Christianity and eugenics.

The chapter’s first section recovers the conceptual space heredity occupied between the
1830s, when it emerged as a coherent biological concept among French physiologists and
physicians, to when Holmes began writing in the 1850s. Holmes regards the concept of heredity
as the biological transmission of traits from parents to offspring as obvious, but that
understanding is, I argue, contingent upon a shift away from previous models of hereditary
transmission that view similarities between parents and offspring as a result of the environmental
circumstances surrounding conception, gestation, and birth. I demonstrate that as the biological
model of heredity gained acceptance in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it came to
be understood as the transmission of not only phenotypic features such as hair color and stature
but also mental and moral characteristics such as temperament and character. In the second
section I turn from biological heredity to theological heredity to analyze how Calvinist
theologians such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge understand heredity’s function in the
document of original sin. I argue that Holmes’s critique centers on his understanding of the friction
between theological and biological conceptions of heredity.

In the third section I analyze Holmes’s use of allegory to advance his argument against
Calvinism. I argue that his first novel and first extended attack on Calvinism, *Elsie Venner*
(1861, first serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* beginning December 1859), tellingly subtitled *A Romance of Destiny*, uses an allegorical literary mode to address biology’s implications for original sin through the figure of Elsie Venner, its teenaged protagonist. In the novel, readers follow teacher Bernard Langdon as he unravels Venner’s unaccountable, unprovoked hostility. Langdon discovers that she behaves as she does because her constitution was altered when a snake bit her pregnant mother. The snake venom, absorbed in utero, causes her to be, seemingly, part snake and therefore subject to the snakelike propensity to fascinate and ensnare others. The novel’s first preface announces that in “calling this narrative a ‘romance,’” the Author wishes to make sure of being indulged in the common privileges of the poetic license”; although “a grave scientific doctrine may be detected lying beneath some of the delineations of character,” he does not “pledg(e) his absolute belief in it” (v). “It was adopted,” he writes, “as a convenient medium of truth rather than as an accepted scientific conclusion” (v). In other words, Venner’s unusual physiological circumstances and the “delineations of character” consequent to them are to be understood as allegorical of rather than a representation of scientific doctrine. But, I argue, expressing “scientific doctrine” through symbolism and the allegorical figure of Elsie Venner raises some problems for Holmes’s attempt to address heredity’s consequences for original sin: the circumstances that give rise to Venner’s inherited tendencies are so singular and circumstantial that, as Holmes’s first biographer John T. Morse writes, “one could sneak away from giving a decisive answer to the questions raised” in the novel (265-66). As I will discuss, Holmes’s prefaces for subsequent editions of the novel published in 1883 and 1891 attempt retroactively to revise the romance into something more straightforward in its representations, more objective, more scientific—a “test” of original sin, as the second preface puts it. I read these revisionary prefaces as reflecting both heredity’s signal role in the late nineteenth-century
American imagination and the literary shift from the Romantic, allegorical mode to the realist mode and its accompanying characteristics, especially its claims to objectivity.

In the chapter’s fourth section, I turn to Elsie Venner’s sibling novel, The Guardian Angel (1867). The novel is largely ignored in the scholarship—one could call it a forgotten novel—but, I argue, it seeks to refine the theological argument of its predecessor by abandoning the allegorical mode and shifting to a realist mode. The Guardian Angel, like Elsie Venner, uses a young woman’s inherited tendencies as a case study in limited responsibility that argues that Calvinists ought not blame all of humanity for Adam’s sins, but in the second novel those tendencies are transmitted through biological heredity rather than snake venom. Pressing its point through normal and widely known bodily processes, I argue, lends it realist verisimilitude, establishing both a biology-based understanding of heredity and Holmes’s authority to express heredity’s repercussions for the doctrine of original sin. In the novel Holmes seeks to articulate a “doctrine of limited responsibility,” by which those who inherit bad tendencies are shown a proportionate amount of lenience (Works VI: viii). If a person does inherit a depraved nature, then he or she ought to be pitied, for one does not choose one’s nature. Further, as the novel depicts, inherited tendencies might actively impede one’s ability to distinguish right from wrong acts altogether. Holmes presses his case through the story of Myrtle Hazard, a teenaged girl who inherits her ancestors’ qualities and inclinations. Those inheritances cause her to act in ways she normally would not, and she often finds herself in morally hazardous situations because of them. The novel’s narrator emphasizes throughout that we ought not blame her for what she cannot help doing, though her strict Calvinist guardians do.

63 The novel is so ignored in the scholarship that Cynthia J. Davis, whose book Bodily and Narrative Forms offers a persuasive reading of Elsie Venner, mistakenly refers to A Mortal Antipathy (1885), not The Guardian Angel, as the “subsequent novel” to Elsie Venner (30).
Hazard works to overcome the limits to her moral capability to gain a fuller range of agency, and she does so not through providential means but through the acquisition of good habits and the guidance of her friends and mentors. Holmes, then, suggests that inherited tendencies are something to educate and treat rather than condemn. And this is where the stakes of Holmes’s project cohere: his scientific approach to responsibility does not end in abnegating it altogether (a charge still leveled by opponents of the insanity defense) but rather in finding ways to accrue more agency.

By turning to heredity to explore what it means to be responsible for one’s actions, Holmes seeks to explain God’s duties to humanity in terms of “the total moral capacity of the finite agent” as discovered by science rather than “the scale of the Infinite” as deduced by theology (“Mechanism,” Works VIII: 87). As I will show, part of this explanation involves figuring inherited tendencies as physical (and thus exculpatory) rather than spiritual characteristics, a distinction observed even by the most orthodox Calvinists. This means that though Holmes does attack Calvinist theology, he does so in ways ultimately intelligible to its doctrines. And by tracing how Holmes shifts from allegory to realism in his attempt to reconcile theology to biology, this chapter reveals the reciprocities between literature and science. When Holmes turns to the realist mode in The Guardian Angel, he adopts the authority of biology; he also, by putting the ethical and theological repercussions of that biology into narrative form, transforms it into new conceptual structures and disseminates them to the public. In turn, Holmes’s ways of thinking about heredity—its power to mitigate responsibility and the need to monitor and guide inheritors of “bad” traits or impulses, especially—became available to eugenicists, who elaborated them into their own forms. What Holmes understood as progressivism thus became over time as strong a determinism as that he set himself up against.
Like Begets Like

Charles Boewe is correct when he writes that “it is very difficult to establish any exact sources for Holmes’s scientific knowledge of heredity”: in his 1867 preface to The Guardian Angel, Holmes insists that the “successive development of inherited bodily aspects and habitues” are “well known to all who have lived long enough to see families grow up under their own eyes” (Boewe, Heredity 113; Holmes, Works VI: vi). At no point in his first two novels does he refer to another scientist or physician to support what seems obvious to him. But I am less interested in determining Holmes’s “exact sources” than I am in recovering the broader epistemic conditions under which Holmes could understand his view of heredity as the “successive development of inherited bodily aspects and habitues” as obvious. Although the concept of heredity as the biological transmission of traits from parents to offspring seems as self-evident today as it did to Holmes, it did not take shape as a coherent way of explaining similarities between parents and offspring until well into the nineteenth century. Historian of science Carlos López-Beltrán writes that “for those living under different physiological and theological frames,” including those anterior to Holmes, similarities between parents and children “could be accounted for in different ways or dismissed as accidental or irrelevant” (“Medical Origins” 105). Before the 1830s, when French physiologists popularized the modern model of heredity, the transmission of traits was understood to be contingent upon the environmental circumstances surrounding “conception, pregnancy, embryonic development, parturition, and lactation” (Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 3). Whatever similarities inhere between parents and offspring were understood as a function of “the similarity in the constellation of causes,” whether environmental or social, “involved in each act of generation” (3). Müller-Wille and Rheinberger draw upon Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (1760) as an
illustration: in the act of conceiving Shandy, his mother asks his father whether he had wound their clock for the night (1). The distracting question hampers the man’s ejaculation, which “scattered and dispersed the animal spirits” that transmit the stuff of a “man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world” from father to child. Shandy is consequently doomed to an absurd life (2). He can only wish that “either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing” (1). For Sterne and his eighteenth-century contemporaries, the transmission of characteristics is contingent upon the circumstances of conception, “understood as an individual, separate act” (Müller-Wille and Rheinberger 4). The stuff of inheritance inheres not just in the animal spirits themselves but also in the singular means of their emission.

In this section I trace the emergence of the idea that hereditary traits originate in parents’ biological makeup rather than the circumstances of conception and development. As I will discuss, one of the consequences of the shift from social and environmental to biological models of heredity is the new idea that not only “the superficial qualities of color, height, weight, and form of the body” but also “the internal constitution of tissues and organs” and thus “peculiarities of temperament and constitution” are inherited (López-Beltrán, “Medical Origins” 120). I analyze the moral implications of ascribing an individual’s temperament and constitution to heredity, including Holmes’s argument that inherited tendencies impose limits on the bounds of moral responsibility. In other words, I recover the period, situated between the early nineteenth-century emphasis on environment and the Darwinian, late nineteenth-century emphasis on species, when heredity addressed “the fluctuating patterns and processes that structure life at the subspecific level” (Müler-Wille and Rheinberger 16). I claim that this period
is of special import to Holmes’s first two novels: the structure of ideas about heredity current in midcentury, especially the idea that one’s temperament is inherited, allows Holmes to conceive of heredity as morally and theologically salient.

Two poems make the distinction between environmental and biological models of heredity clear. In 1803, Charles Darwin’s grandfather, the naturalist and poet Erasmus Darwin, published *The Temple of Nature; Or, the Origin of Society: A Poem, with Philosophical Notes*, an epic didactic poem exploring such topics as psychology, botany, reproduction, and materialism. Of heredity he writes:

> The clime unkind, or noxious food, instills  
> To embryon nerves hereditary ills;  
> The feeble births acquir’d diseases chase,  
> ‘Till Death extinguish the degenerate race. (71)

In Darwin’s poem such environmental factors as climate and “noxious food” afflict the embryo’s nerves with “hereditary ills” that are “hereditary” not because they are inherent to the embryo’s biological structure but because the uterine environment was affected in such a way that the child will be born “feeble” (71). Historian of science Philip K. Wilson notes that Darwin, like his mentors William Hunter and William Cullen, understands certain environmental factors as transmitting to an embryo or fetus “the predisposition of disease,” resulting in “feeble births” susceptible to “acquir’d diseases” (137). Today, we would think of the child as having congenital, rather than hereditary, ailments.

Compare the above lines to a stanza of “Dorothy Q,” a poem written by Holmes about a portrait of his great-grandmother, Dorothy Quincy, published in the January 1871 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*:

> What if a hundred years ago  
> Those close-shut lips had answered NO,  
> When forth the tremulous question came
That cost the maiden her Norman name,
And under the folds that look so still
The bodice swelled with the bosom's thrill?
Should I be I, or would it be
One tenth another, to nine tenths me? (Works XIII: 48-49).

Holmes wonders in his poem who he would be had Quincy refused her soon-to-be husband’s offer of marriage. He construes the question as tied to his very identity: “Should I be I” (would he be exactly who he is), were one-tenth (one-eighth, in reality) of his ancestry different? Or would he be only “nine tenths me” as he currently is, the other tenth being “another”? Heredity, for Holmes, is not a matter of the environmental circumstances of conception and pregnancy but of traits that are inherent to his progenitors. Because Holmes’s conception of heredity is not founded upon such circumstances, he understands his traits as inherited not only from his parents but also from their parents, theirs, and so on. He—and the midcentury model of heredity that makes his poem possible—thus understands heredity as involving a temporal scope larger than that of earlier models focused on the nine-month span between conception and birth yet smaller than later Darwinian models focused on evolutionary timescales.

Darwin’s and Holmes’s poems also reflect a shift, driven by an intervening biological model of heredity, from conceiving of inheritance primarily in terms of abnormalities and illnesses to conceiving of it in terms of characteristics and dispositions. Not only one’s ailments but one’s entire makeup, then, came to be understood as heritable. The implications of this shift are twofold: first, heredity came to be understood as the transference of normal rather than abnormal traits. Language tracked that change: Müller-Wille and Rheinberger write that whereas “the adjective hereditary can be dated back to antiquity in the context of nosography (maladies héréditaires), a transition to a nominal use (hérédité) took place only from the 1830s onward, first among French physiologists and physicians, then in other European scientific circles” (12).
Historian Carlos López-Beltrán agrees: although, he writes, traits such as hair color were sometimes construed as hereditary prior to the 1830s, “the reference to the hereditary nature of a trait occurred, however, with much more frequency and consistency when anomalies, moral or physical, were the subject” (“Medical Origins” 106). The second set of implications arises from the first: if putatively “normal” traits, not just abnormalities or diseases, are inherited, then one’s entire being, including one’s temperament and personality, is inherited. Holmes can thus imagine himself simultaneously as a mixture of his progenitors and as “I” and “me,” for he understands himself as the sum of his antecedents.

The shift from an environmental to a biological model of heredity is not due to the Whiggish march of scientific progress from “wrong” to “right” approaches to inheritance but to a set of developments in the early decades of the nineteenth century that positioned heredity to become an explanatory concept in biology. López-Beltrán argues convincingly that understanding this shift requires distinguishing between hereditary transmission and heredity (“Cradle” 40). The concept of hereditary transmission has existed since antiquity, but the concept of heredity as a way to explain hereditary transmission itself did not take coherent form until the nineteenth century. López-Beltrán takes the work of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, whose 1809 *Philosophie Zoologique* proposes an early theory of evolution, as an example of the earlier model of heredity (40). Today, he writes, although we tend to locate Lamarck “in the center of debates about acquired characteristics, neither Lamarck (nor anyone else in this time for that matter) paid attention to heredity itself, as the notion of heredity was not yet developed” (40).

Lamarck’s theory of evolution is contingent upon his theory of acquired characteristics, according to which an organism can transmit to its descendants a tendency to develop phenotypic
characteristics it acquired before it reproduces. He famously explains his theory by way of the giraffe’s long neck:

It is interesting to observe the result of habit in the particular shape and size of the giraffe (*Camelo-pardalis*): this animal, the largest of the mammals, is known to live in the interior of Africa in places where the soil is nearly always arid and barren, so that it is obliged to browse on the leaves of trees and to make constant efforts to reach them. From this habit, long maintained in all its race, it has resulted that the animal’s fore-legs have become longer than its hind legs, and that its neck is lengthened to such a degree that the giraffe, without standing up on its hind legs, attains a height of six metres (nearly 20 feet). (122)

For Lamarck, a giraffe’s “constant efforts” to reach high leaves forms a “habit” that elongates its neck during its lifetime. “The frequent use of any organ,” he explains, “when confirmed by habit, increases the functions of that organ, leads to its development and endows it with a size and power that it does not possess in animals which exercise it less” (119). According to this theory, giraffes developed their long necks over many generations of individual animals habitually stretching their necks, resulting in each generation having, on average, a longer neck than the last. On face, it seems as if Lamarck articulates a biological theory of heredity, for he does not view the circumstances of conception and pregnancy as affecting the transmission of traits. But all that is reproductively transmitted from parent to child, he later explains, is a “tendency of the organs or a state of the viscera adapted” for a given environment (339). In other words, “it is essential that circumstances should favour the development of this tendency in the new individual; for otherwise the individual would acquire another temperament, inclinations, and characteristics” (339). Because offspring only inherit a tendency to develop like their parents, they only develop in the same manner when their environments are the same. A giraffe would have to be born into an environment with high leaves to develop a long neck and to end its life with a neck like longer than its parents’. Otherwise, it would never experience the environmental pressures necessary for it to develop the habit of stretching its neck. The Lamarckian theory of
acquired characteristics thus depends upon (post-natal) environmental triggers rather than inherited biological structures that persist from parent to child.

López-Beltrán identifies the entry for “Héréditaire” in the sixty-volume Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales (1812-1820) as a key step towards the emergence of a biological theory of heredity (“Cradle” 47). The entry includes physician Antoine Petit’s Essai sur les Maladies Héréditaires (1817), in which he argues that the reproductive transmission of characteristics “has to be based on particular states of the bodily constitution communicated to children by parents” (48). As the title of Petit’s essay makes clear, his understanding of heredity draws on the prevailing focus on disease as the primary subject of hereditary transmission even as it seeks to account for familiar similarities in constitution. Understanding a child’s “bodily constitution” (its biological makeup or, in an analogous term of the time, “organization”) as derived from its parents’ bodies rather than environmental circumstances made it thinkable as a biological concept that explains both the transmission of pathology from parents to offspring and the transmission of normal bodily characteristics. And once heredity took form as a coherent biological concept, an avalanche of speculations about its mechanisms and boundaries followed.

Gabriel Andral, one of Holmes’s professors at Paris’s École de Médecine and the man who succeeded François Broussais’s chair at the same institution, lectured to Holmes and his classmates “on the possibility of hereditary characteristics and weaknesses” in 1833 and 1834 (Tilton 105). Dominique Auguste Lereboullet, a French physician, writes in his 1834 De l’hérédité dans les Maladies that biological heredity is an “unshakable law”:

“If we direct our gaze to the members of the same family we will find between the children and the parents the most obvious conformity: features of the face, of the stature, the sound of the voice, the color of the skin, the constitution, temperament, habits, character … everything is similar. It is under the influence of this unshakable law, in virtue of which man gives life to beings similar to him, that one can see sometimes that vices of conformation are transmitted from generation to generation. In such way we
Inherit the constitution and temperament from our parents; we inherit their physical and moral characters; we inherit their conformational vices. (qtd. in López-Beltrán, “Cradle” 51-52)

By 1834, biological heredity had become the dominant model for understanding physical similarities between parents and offspring. For Lereboullet, parents and offspring share not only “obvious” similarities such as facial features and skin color but also “constitution and temperament” and “physical and moral characters”: in his account we see the explanatory reach of heredity beginning to range beyond physical traits into mental and moral characteristics.

As that expanded explanatory reach spread outside of medical circles, heredity, like the sciences of habit, psychiatry, and digestion before it, came to be understood as a potential cure for societal ills. Orson Fowler, famed New York phrenologist and reformer, could thus write in his *Hereditary Descent: Its Laws and Facts Applied to Human Improvement* (1848) that “EVERY constitutional quality of offspring, mental and physical, has its procuring cause in similar qualities in parentage”: If causation governs this resemblance [between parents and offspring] in part, it governs all … Either NO causation governs this matter, or else the most minute constitutional peculiarities of children are caused by similar elements in their parents. Then let parents learn and remember that their prospective children will be the very images of themselves, reflected in all their shades of feeling and phases of character; inheriting similar tastes, swayed by similar passions, governed by kindred sentiments; debased by the same vices, ennobled by like virtues, adorned by kindred charms and graces, and endowed with similar moral powers and intellectual capabilities with themselves. (19)

The title page of *Hereditary Descent* distills the above passage into two pithy maxims: “Like begets like” and “Each after its kind.” From this premise, virtually identical to the findings of Lereboulet and other French physiologists, Fowler concludes that different combinations of parents might “render their offspring short or tall, diseased or healthy … honest or unjust, ingenious, musical, witty, acquisitive, communicative, poetical, logical, oratorical, profound, or whatever else may be desired” (20). Indeed, he writes, prospective parents are “COMPELLED”
to choose mates with complementary traits, “or else not to become parents” (21). “Your children,” in sum, “are OBLIGED to be what you are, and cannot help themselves”: prospective parents are therefore tasked with ensuring that they do not marry mates whose undesirable qualities might reappear in the next generation (21). A section titled “Specific Applications of These Laws: Or, Who Should Marry Whom” provides guidelines on what traits and phrenological qualities best mix (261). If dietary reform can be understood as a technology of self-creation, as I argue in Chapter 3, then Fowler’s proto-eugenic reproductive guidelines articulate a technology of other-creation. Much as Graham means for his guidelines to enable others derive freedom from self-control, Fowler imagines himself as enabling prospective parents to choose what sort of children they will have by assessing and selectively limiting their mates. He differs from latecentury eugenicists in his focus on the parent rather than the state as the entity that governs reproduction, but certainly he shares (and participates in enabling) their fantasy of harnessing heredity to optimize humanity.

Fowler’s ideas illuminate several aspects of biological heredity that distinguish it from earlier models. First, he emphasizes that parents transmit not only their physical but also their emotional, intellectual, and moral qualities to their children, linked by the concept of the constitution. This explanatory breadth made it so that a person’s characteristics could be understood as outside his or her personal, conscious control: children are obliged, Fowler writes, to become what their parents are (21). Second, understanding personal characteristics as a function of heredity enabled individuals such as Holmes to equate his or her biological inheritance with his or her identity or being. Holmes’s wondering if a different great-grandfather would make him “One tenth another, to nine tenths me,” in other words, would not have been possible had he been born a century earlier: his verse is contingent upon the biological theory of
heredity. Third, many of the qualities that Fowler asserts can be hereditarily transmitted have a strong moral weight. Because Fowler believes such qualities as honesty to be just as much a product of heredity as stature or skin color, and because he views children as “debased by the same vices, ennobled by like virtues” as their parents, he makes choosing one’s mate a moral choice (19). Fourth, viewing moral qualities as hereditary suggests that the bounds of moral responsibility should be extended beyond the scale of the individual into the scale of the family. A family’s underlying predispositions, preserved in its shared biology, could thus be considered in ascribing moral responsibility.

In much of his writing, Holmes argues as much: in his essay “Crime and Automatism” (1874) he asks, if both physical and mental qualities are inherited, “why should not deep-rooted moral defects and obliquities show themselves, as well as other qualities, in the descendants of moral monsters?” (Works VIII: 343). The question is ethically and theologically salient, he writes, because “we are getting to be predestinarians as much as Edwards or Calvin was, only instead of universal corruption of nature derived from Adam, we recognize inherited congenital tendencies,—some good, some bad,—for which the subject of them is in no means responsible” (380). For Holmes, both Calvinist theology and heredity embrace some version of determinism: for the former, Adam’s original sin forever corrupted human nature, inclining us all towards depravity; for the latter, “inherited congenital tendencies” incline us towards predetermined behaviors. The two differ, as I will discuss in the next section, in that blaming Adam’s descendants for their inherited sinful natures is a foundational point of Calvinist doctrine whereas inherited moral deficiencies ought to be understood as limiting moral responsibility, at least in Holmes’s view. And it is from this distinction between Calvinist and biological theories of inheritance that Holmes’s theological project emerges.
Hereditary Corruption

In *Elsie Venner* Holmes stages a confrontation between science and religion in the form of an encounter between Dr. Kittredge, a grizzled country doctor, and the Rev. Dr. Honeywood, a local minister whose heart, Holmes writes, is more humane than the doctrines he explicates on Sunday mornings. The two men are invited to the same dinner party, and each takes an armchair and sit “squared off against each other” to talk (313). Once the two touch upon the topic of free will, Kittredge asks Honeywood if he would like to know his views on the subject; the pastor agrees. Kittredge, a mouthpiece for Holmes, asserts that theologians “work out the machinery of responsibility in an abstract kind of way; they have a sort of algebra of human nature, in which friction and strength (or weakness) of material are left out” (321). Responsibility, Holmes suggests, is not so abstract as mathematics; human nature, being enmeshed in the fluctuations of the body, is such that we ought rather to think of responsibility the way we do mechanical engineering. A wheelbarrow made of wood and one made of iron might perform the same task, but under the same conditions one will crack while the other bends; exposed to rain, one will swell while the other rusts. By figuring responsibility as a product of machinery and human nature as subject to the same physical forces as any other material, Holmes calls attention to the ways that the will can be damaged by the dents, cracks, and corrosions that affect all machinery, including the human body, in time. The algebraic model of responsibility, in contrast, figures each individual as equal in responsibility, so that any given moral calculation is uniformly applicable.

Ministers, Kittredge continues, think of the will as totally unconstrained, “as if it stood on a high look-out, with plenty of light, and elbow-room reaching to the horizon” (323). Physicians see “how it [the will] is tied up by inferior organization, by disease, by all sorts of crowding
interferences” imposed by the human body (323). Monomania and other partial insanities, he says, teach us that one need not be totally deranged to be insane and thus that we should “recognize all sorts of queer tendencies in minds supposed to be sane, so that we have nothing but compassion for a large class of persons condemned as sinners by theologians, but considered by us as invalids” (323). As we learn more of the ways that a variety of automatic, unconscious bodily processes affect our behavior, Holmes suggests, what used to be a spiritual wickedness looks more like a bodily disorder. Kittredge argues for an epistemic shift from sin to bodily illness regarding those affected by “queer tendencies” of mind; as Chapter 2 argues, moral insanity and phrenology laid the groundwork for such a shift some thirty years earlier.

For Kittredge, inherited tendencies, too, should inspire pity rather than condemnation: physicians, who “have constant reasons for noticing the transmission of qualities from parents to offspring,” do not condemn a child for behaviors it could not help inheriting. They “find it hard to hold a child accountable in any moral point of view for inherited bad temper or tendency to drunkenness,—as hard as we should to blame him for inheriting gout or asthma” (322). His assertion dramatizes one of the central assumptions of post-1830 theories of heredity, namely that mental and moral characteristics are as heritable as illnesses.

The exchange between Honeywood and Kittredge dramatizes a larger argument Holmes makes in his first two novels. Biological theories of heredity, he argues, because they conceptualize behavior as to some degree determined by ancestry, excuse inherited behaviors as out of the individual’s control; therefore, the doctrine of original sin, according to which all of humanity bears the guilt of Adam’s sin, is inconsistent with the existence of a just and merciful God. Adam’s children should be no more responsible for his sin than someone who inherits a tendency to steal should be held fully responsible for stealing. Analyzing this argument and the
means by which Holmes’s novels articulate it requires a grasp of how Calvinist theologians understand Adam’s relation to his descendants. Therefore, in this section I explore the ways that heredity, understood as the transmission of Adam’s guilt to his descendants, operates in the theology of Jonathan Edwards, New England’s premier Calvinist intellectual, and Charles Hodge, Holmes’s contemporary and a prominent theologian of the conservative Princeton school. I show that just as physiologists understood heredity as preserving biological structures across generations, Edwards and Hodge understood it as preserving the guilt of Adam’s sin. Holmes’s critique originates, I argue, in the friction between these two conceptions of heredity.

Charles Boewe writes that “the scientific element” of Holmes’s writing should receive more attention than the theological element, for, he argues, science provides the foundation for his arguments about religion (“Reflex” 303). But those arguments are founded equally on Holmes’s sophisticated understanding of Calvinist theology. That understanding, in turn, is partly a result of a childhood steeped in religion. He received extensive religious education as a boy, and like many other “Boston Brahmins” (a term he coined in Elsie Venner), he was schooled in a strain of New England Calvinism devoted to preserving the austere doctrines of centuries past. His father, Abiel, was a pastor at Cambridge’s First Congregational Church and was trained at Yale University, during his time there a fortress of orthodox Calvinism (Tilton 10). Abiel maintained that orthodoxy throughout his life: in the 1820s and 30s, he became involved in a schism between liberal and conservative Congregationalists that resulted in his association with Lyman Beecher, the conservative pastor of the Hanover Street Church in Boston (Hoyt 34). He also ceased to exchange places with liberal, Unitarian and Unitarian-leaning pastors on Sundays, favoring instead Beecher and other conservatives (34). Sundays in the Holmes household were strictly reserved for Sabbath activities, which required, as Holmes’s
biographer Eleanor Tilton writes, “a decorum, a silence, an inactivity very trying to a nervous
and talkative boy” (10). The family’s library tended towards theological texts; its only secular
offering was a volume of Dryden’s poems (6). More representative books included Bunyan’s
Pilgrim’s Progress and the New England Primer (7, 9). Like most other children raised in
Calvinist households, Holmes learned from the Primer the shorter Westminster catechism, a
series of questions and answers that outlines Calvinist theological tenants.  

Holmes also learned from the Primer the doctrine of original sin, summarized in the
verses “In Adam’s Fall / We sinned all” (Primer 8). In other words, the Fall—the original sin—
was committed by Adam, but we, his posterity, bear the weight of sin along with him. The
shorter Westminster catechism elaborates the Fall and its consequences: “The covenant being
made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by
ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression” (33). To be fallen,
the catechism continues, is to be in “a state of sin and misery,” two distinct concepts (33).
Humanity’s sinful state is threefold: it “consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of
original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original
sin, together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it” (34). In other words, humans
are sinful in that they are 1. Guilty, being descended from Adam, of Adam’s sin; 2. Stripped of
the righteousness enjoyed by Adam and Eve in their innocence; 3. Of a nature forever corrupted
by their loss of innocence. Calvinist theologians emphasized that while “the want of original
righteousness” is a negative quality (a lack of righteousness), “the corruption of [Adam’s] whole
nature” is a positive quality (corruption is added to Adam’s nature) (34). The state of misery is
the “lost communion with God” that deprives humans of what Edwards calls the “spiritual sense”

64 For example: “Q. What is the chief end of man? / A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to
enjoy him forever.”
by which the elect perceive God’s goodness (34). And all of these punishments are preserved and passed on from Adam by “ordinary generation,” or reproduction, which is why another term for the doctrine of original sin is “total hereditary depravity.” Because sinfulness is inherited, even newborns are responsible for Adam’s sin: “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.” (KJV, Psalms 58:3). Heredity, understood as the means by which the stuff of human nature is communicated from parents to children, is thus the vehicle of original sin.

Charles Hodge, onetime president of Princeton University, elaborates hereditary guilt and corruption in his magisterial *Systematic Theology* (1870), the nineteenth century’s most comprehensive statement of Calvinist theology. His disagreements with predecessor Jonathan Edwards’ conception of inherited guilt are few but significant. Hodge writes, correctly, that Edwards explains our inheritance of Adam’s guilt as due to God’s perception of Adam and his descendants as being ontologically one (218). For Edwards, whose theology is as metaphysically complex as it is pious, all substance is God, and reality exists because of His continued willingness for it to do so. Because all substance is Himself and past, present, and future are equally knowable, Adam and his posterity are in God’s eyes one in the way we think of a seed and the tree it becomes as one. It would thus not make sense to think of Adam and his descendants as separate agents. Hodge recoils from this theory, writing that “if God is the only substance He is the only agent in the universe … therefore there can be no free agency, no sin, no responsibility, no individual existence. The universe is only the self-manifestation of God. This doctrine, therefore, in its consequences, is essentially pantheistic” (219-20).

In contrast to Edwards, Hodge favors intuitive, commonsense distinctions between substances and persons. His view more closely echoes the Westminster catechism: Adam’s
descendants bear his guilt, want of righteousness, and corruption through a compromised nature inherited through “ordinary generation” (229-30). The original sin changed human nature such that our corrupted dispositions incline us towards evil. Hodge does not accept the argument that one cannot be held responsible for inherited depravity: he opposes “the doctrine which admits a hereditary depravity of nature, and makes it consist in an inclination to sin, but denies that it is itself sinful” (230). Some theologians, he writes, make “a distinction between vitium [hereditary sinfulness] and peccatum [actual sin],” but Hodge finds that distinction flimsy: hereditary sinfulness is actual sin (230). A depraved nature inclines a person towards sin, but that one’s nature is so inclined makes one’s sins no less sinful, contra Holmes. “Depravity, or inherent hereditary corruption,” he writes, “has always been designated peccatum, and therefore to say that it is not peccatum, but merely vitium, produces confusion and leads to error … it is contrary to Scripture for the Bible undeniably designates indwelling or hereditary corruption, or vitium, as ἁμαρτία [hamartia, sin]” (230-1). Despite Edwards’ and Hodge’s differences, they agree on one crucial concept: we, as Adam’s children, bear the guilt of his sins as surely as he did.

Holmes was apathetic to his father’s attempts to educate him in Calvinist theological orthodoxy even from childhood. John T. Morse includes in his Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes (1897), a collection of Holmes’s scattered autobiographical reflections, a fragment titled “Religious and Literary Education.” In this fragment, Holmes writes of Abiel’s expectation that he and his siblings would recite to their mother the shorter Westminster catechism. She “sat down to hear us recite of ‘justification,’ ‘adoption,’ and ‘sanctification,’ and the rest of the programme,” he writes; “We learned nominally that we were a set of little fallen wretches,
exposed to the wrath of God by the fact of that existence which we could not help” (38). “I do not think,” he continues, “we believed a word of it, or even understood much of its phraseology” (38). His mind “early revolted from the teachings of the Catechism and the books which followed out its dogmas” (38). He directs special ire at hereditary depravity, which he calls a particularly “New England doctrine” (44). It asserts, Holmes writes, “that a child must repent of, and be punished for, not only his own sins but those of his first parent. This was the foundation of the condemnation of unborn and unbaptized children, as taught in the Day of Doom, the celebrated and most popular poem of Michael Wigglesworth” (44). This doctrine, “held up to scorn in the fable of the ‘Wolf and the Lamb,’ was accepted by the church as in perfect harmony with the human reason and the divine character” (44). He was left caught between two worlds: one was the orthodox Calvinism of his home, and the other was the liberal “Unitarian atmosphere” of Boston’s colleges (39).

In 1857, Holmes put these tensions into print when he began writing as the “Autocrat at the Breakfast-Table” for the Atlantic, a publication he named and helped bring into being (Tilton 235). The first installment of the Autocrat’s chatter on “mathematics, mutual admiration societies, puns, the naturalness of conceit, and self-made men” was published in the same issue as Emerson’s polytheistic “Brahma” (235). The Autocrat pieces, which feature an endlessly

65 In Calvinist theology, justification, adoption, and sanctification are steps towards the reception of divine grace.

66 Wigglesworth’s poem, published in 1662, describes the Day of Judgment.

67 One of Aesop’s fables. In it, a wolf decides to eat a lamb, so he accuses the lamb of insulting him the previous year to have an excuse to do so. The lamb replies that he is only six months old, so he could not have done as the wolf says. The wolf responds that if the lamb did not do it, then it must have been his father, so he eats him anyway. The moral is that someone seeking to abuse power will always find a reason to do so, including blaming a child for its father’s infractions.
talking, Holmesean figure holding court at his landlady’s breakfast-table, is Holmes at his most charming and affable. Still, the Autocrat insists on needling the Divinity Student, another boarder, on theological matters—why do so few pastors listen to each others’ sermons, he impishly asks—which netted the Atlantic condemnation from the religious press (Works I: 29).

In the meantime, Holmes delivered a 1858 Boston Lyceum lecture on “The Chief End of Man” that suggested that the chief end of man might be found in earthly works rather than in the glorification of God, as dictated by the Westminster catechism (Hoyt 186). The Congregationalist, a Calvinist periodical, demanded that Holmes be removed from the Lyceum lecture circuit (187). Seeming to delight in shocking the religious press, Holmes cut the Congregationalist piece out of the paper and put it in a scrapbook. (Tilton 249-50). Despite (or, perhaps, because of) this criticism, the Autocrat pieces were a tremendous success, and financier Moses Philips paid him to produce another series of breakfast-table books, “The Professor at the Breakfast-Table” (245).

With the publication of the first piece of “Professor at the Breakfast-Table” in January 1859, Holmes began a bolder attack on Calvinist theology. The Professor is a far more pointed and critical figure than the urbane Autocrat: at one point, he calls Jonathan Edwards “a man with a brain as nicely adjusted for certain mechanical processes as Babbage’s calculating machine” (Works II: 114). In this formulation, Edwards is a computer that assimilates theological concepts in ways that are logically coherent but that are, at heart, removed from and indifferent to human experience. The Professor also mocks ministers who think the earth is four thousand years old and predicts that a hundred years’ time will see an end to the nineteenth century’s religious “barbarisms” (114). In one entry, “The Professor Finds a Fly in His Teacup,” he counters Calvinists’ complaints by declaring that he “didn’t know that Truth was such an invalid” that it
cannot be subjected to scrutiny, which drew protests from the Boston Recorder and the New York Courier (Holmes 108, Hoyt 215). By this time, the identity of the breakfast-table writer was Boston’s worst-kept secret, and Holmes had ample opportunity to add to his scrapbook (Tilton 249).

Neglecting the structure of theological beliefs to which Holmes addresses himself, as most scholars writing about Holmes do, risks ignoring the nuances he brings to his critique. Few take him seriously at all, preferring instead to characterize him as the Saturday Club’s class clown, a whimsical dilettante whose literary and medical contributions happen almost by accident. But bringing Calvinist conceptions of heredity to attention illuminates the ways that Holmes’s first two novels, both of which feature heredity as a foundational plot device, argue against what Holmes views as theological barbarism. Further, as I argue in the rest of the chapter, attending to Holmes’s grasp of Calvinist theology enables us to see how Holmes articulates his position in terms intelligible to Calvinist doctrine. Elsie Venner and The Guardian Angel, then, attempt to establish continuities between theological and biological models of heredity.

**A Palpable Outside Agency**

In 1859 and 1860, Holmes published a serial novel in the Atlantic titled The Professor’s Story (later published in 1861 by Ticknor and Fields as Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny) that

68 Joan Burbick acknowledges Holmes’s theological argument but analyzes instead how Venner’s “poisoning by the rattlesnake becomes an emblem of the dangers embedded in the bodies of the hegemonic classes” (242). Randall Knoper reads Holmes’s first two novels as “stories of reproduction and representation” that “crystallize problems that emerge from the juncture of art and the nervous system” (724).

69 Peter Gibian, however, argues that Holmes’s many interests signal an interest in what we would today call interdisciplinarity rather than an inability to pursue any one subject deeply.
would become his best-known novel. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe dated September 13, 1860, Holmes elaborates his assertion, given in the novel’s first preface, that “a grave scientific doctrine may be detected” beneath its charming New England setting and melodramatic plot:

You see exactly what I wish to do: to write a story with enough of interest in its characters and incidents to attract a certain amount of popular attention. Under cover of this to stir that mighty question of automatic agency in its relation to self-determination. To do this by means of a palpable outside agency, predetermining certain traits of character and certain apparently voluntary acts, such as the common judgment of mankind and the tribunals of law and theology have been in the habit of recognizing as sin and crime. Not exactly insanity, either general or partial, in its common sense, but rather an unconscious intuitive tendency, dating from a powerful ante-natal influence, which modifies the whole organization. (Morse 264)

Holmes seeks, in other words, to wrap his speculations about “automatic agency” as it relates to common judgment, the law, and theology in an interesting story. He frames the characters and plot of the story as a “cover” for his ideas and as a way to disseminate them to a popular audience—the narrative, then, is much like Pilgrim’s Progress, the didactic Christian allegory. He wishes to use the influence of “a palpable outside agency” as a way to illustrate how behaviors that appear voluntary can be motivated by “certain traits of character” alien to a person’s nature, thus calling into question whether a person could be considered responsible for them. And indeed Holmes’s novel does just that: Bernard Langdon, who interrupts his medical studies to make money teaching, finds in his classroom Elsie Venner, a “strange, wild-looking girl” who moves with serpentine grace, basks in the sun, and dances “wild Moorish fandangos” with rattling castanets (51, 147). In time, Langdon discovers that Venner’s pregnant mother was bitten by a snake, which affects the young woman’s bodily organization in such a way that she exhibits snakelike tendencies: she has small, cold, glittering eyes, is rumored to have poisoned a governess, and behaves, at times, maliciously (193). Holmes’s question, repeatedly put to the
reader over the course of the novel, is this: should Venner bear responsibility for actions
motivated by her ophidian impulses?

_Elsie Venner_ attempts to convince its reader that the most humane answer to that question
is “no.” In the most nuanced of the novel’s many digressions on the subject, Langdon writes his
medical school professor a letter asking about Venner’s case: “Do you think there may be
predispositions, inherited or ingrafted, but at any rate constitutional, which shall take out certain
apparently voluntary determinations from the control of the will, and leave them as free from
moral responsibility as the instincts of the lower animals? (220)” His professor replies that his
question “opens a very wide range of speculation”:

> Automatic action in the moral world; the reflex movement which seems to be self-
determination, and has been hanged and howled at as such (metaphorically) for nobody
knows how many centuries: until somebody shall study this as Marshall Hall has studied
reflex nervous action in the bodily system, I would not give much for men's judgments of
each others' characters. Shut up the robber and the defaulter, we must. But what if your
oldest boy had been stolen from his cradle and bred in a North-
Street cellar? What if you
are drinking a little too much wine and smoking a little too much tobacco, and your son
takes after you, and so your poor grandson's brain being a little injured in physical
texture, he loses the fine moral sense on which you pride yourself, and doesn't see the
difference between signing another man's name to a draft and his own? (227)

The professor compares the issue of “Automatic action in the moral world” to Marshall Hall’s
studies of the reflex arc, thus explicitly linking morality to physiology.\(^70\) Like the theorists of
what he calls “that great doctrine of moral insanity,” which he says “has done more to make men
charitable and soften legal and theological barbarism than any one doctrine that I can think of
since the message of peace and good-will to men,” the professor views physicians and
physiologists as the proper arbiters of the nineteenth century’s pressing new moral conundrums

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\(^70\) Holmes was more than familiar with Hall’s work, for he and his colleague Jacob Bigelow
prepared the first American edition of Hall’s *Principles of the Theory and Practice of Medicine*
in 1839 (Boewe 122). In the 1830s Hall articulated the theory of the reflex arc, according to
which nerves can communicate without the mediation of the brain. Hall’s work laid the
foundation for physiological studies of unconscious thought and movement.
(227). Crucially, the professor does not advocate letting criminals run free even if they should not be held morally responsible for their actions: society must protect itself. “Treat bad men exactly as if they were insane,” he tells Langdon later in the letter; “They are in-sane, out of health, morally” (228). Just as a society might restrain an insane man without holding him morally accountable for his actions, the professor asserts, it might restrain criminals not as retribution but as a practical action necessary for the public good.

In the course of this moment and others like it, e.g. the conversation between Dr. Kittredge and the Rev. Dr. Honeywood discussed earlier, Holmes attacks theologians’ distinctions between natural inability and spiritual inability, terms at the heart of Calvinists’ defense of the justice of original sin. Natural inability refers to the limitations of human nature: for example, it is a natural limitation that we cannot fly. As Charles Hodge writes, “A child cannot be required to understand the calculus, or an uneducated man to read the classics” (274). Although in time an uneducated man might learn how to read, so long as he is uneducated he is totally unable to do so. Such things are incompatible with nature, so they cannot be expected. And because natural inability “arises out of the limitations which God has imposed on our nature,” it “thus limits obligation” (274). That protection does not extend, however, to the moral debility imposed by original sin: natural inability, Hodge writes, “does not apply in the sphere of morals and religion, when the inability arises not out of the limitation, but out of the moral corruption of our nature” (274). That is the domain of spiritual inability. Recall that sinfulness is in part a corruption of human nature, which is distinct from God-given limits upon it. This corruption is what inclines Adam’s descendants towards evil.

This inclination, Hodge says, is compatible with “continued obligation”: just because our corruption inclines us towards evil does not excuse us for it (274). He explains as follows:
And as it has been shown from Scripture that the inability of the sinner to repent and believe, to love God and to lead a holy life, does not arise from the limitation of his nature as a creature (as is the case with idiots or brutes); nor from the want of the requisite faculties or capacity, but simply from the corruption of our nature, it follows that it does not exonerate him from the obligation to be and to do all that God requires.

Whereas Hodge agrees that one cannot blame “idiots or brutes” for sinning, given their natural limitations, he insists that a corrupted nature is no excuse for crossing God. Jonathan Edwards, in *Freedom of the Will* (1754), provides a clearer statement on the doctrine: man’s “moral inability, consisting in the strength of his evil inclination, is the very thing wherein his wickedness consists” (309). If moral inability, which is a corruption caused by sin, excuses sin, “then wickedness always carries that in it which excuses it” (309). Therefore, “moral inability alone (which consists in disinclination [to righteousness]) never renders anything improperly the subject matter of precept or command, and never can excuse any person in disobedience, or want of conformity to a command” (309). In contrast, natural inability, “arising from the want of capacity” in mind or body, “wholly excuses” those who suffer from it (309). Hereditary depravity is not a limit to our nature but rather a corruption of it caused by the Fall: it is just, then, for God not to excuse humans on the basis of their inclination towards sin.

Holmes’s conception of heredity broadens the sphere of natural inability. Both Edwards and Hodge agree that natural inability is exculpatory, and both specifically excuse mental limitations (“as is the case with idiots or brutes,” Hodge writes) (274). Holmes, though, would echo theorists of partial insanity and say between perfect mental health and “idiots or brutes” lies a wide range of mental limitations. An image Holmes deploys in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* to explain the will’s limits clarifies the point. The Autocrat describes the will as being like

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71 Edwards’ “moral inability” is analogous to Hodge’s “spiritual ability”: both are contrasts to exculpatory natural inability.
a drop of water imprisoned in a crystal (86). In this image, the crystal—rigid yet arranged according to a given structure—stands in for the body, constituted according to a set of hereditary structures. The drop of water, or the will, has a certain amount of movement within its enclosure, but ultimately that enclosure binds and shapes it. This is not to deny free will and moral responsibility altogether, he writes; in describing the limits of the will he wishes rather to “define moral obligations, and not weaken them” (86). His point is that probing how the body might limit one’s moral agency can lead us to a better, more exact way of thinking about responsibility. One’s “organization,” or physical makeup, he continues, “may reduce the power of the will to nothing, as in some idiots,” which is something that even orthodox Calvinists such as Edwards and Hodge agree erases one’s obligations, for the body’s organization imposes the sorts of limitations that constitute natural inability (86).

What Holmes seeks to add to the concept of natural inability is the idea that from the infant’s or the irrevocably insane person’s total lack of moral agency, “the scale mounts upwards by slight gradations” to a fully responsible person (Autocrat, Works I: 89). Holmes’s interest is in individuals such as Elsie Venner who fall somewhere on that scale. Such individuals call for a more profuse, fine-grained way to reckon their obligations to God than the Calvinists’ binary of naturally unable or naturally able. What Holmes suggests, then, is a modification of how Calvinists understand natural inability rather than a rejection of the concept of sin altogether. A scene in the novel in which Honeywood writes a new sermon, “On the Obligations of an Infinite Creator to a Finite Creature,” after considering Venner’s case dramatizes how Holmes imagines theologians might incorporate the idea of limited responsibility into their theology:

He did not believe in the responsibility of idiots. He did not believe a new-born infant was morally answerable for other people's acts. He thought a man with a crooked spine would never be called to account for not walking erect. He thought if the crook was in his brain, instead of his back, he could not fairly be blamed for any consequence of this
natural defect, whatever lawyers or divines might call it. He argued, that, if a person inherited a perfect mind, body, and disposition, and had perfect teaching from infancy, that person could do nothing more than keep the moral law perfectly. But supposing that the Creator allows a person to be born with an hereditary or ingrafted organic tendency, and then puts this person into the hands of teachers incompetent or positively bad, is not what is called sin or transgression of the law necessarily involved in the premises? Is not a Creator bound to guard his children against the ruin which inherited ignorance might entail on them? Would it be fair for a parent to put into a child's hands the title-deeds to all its future possessions, and a bunch of matches? And are not men children, nay, babes, in the eye of Omniscience? (247-48)

In Honeywood’s sermon, Holmes suggests how biology might lead to doctrinal shifts: the theological conclusions he draws arise from the “logic which had carried him to certain conclusions with reference to human nature” (247). The minister begins by articulating the now-familiar Holmesian argument that a crook in the brain, just like a crook in the back, is a “natural defect” that lessens culpability. But the term “natural defect,” especially in a Calvinist minister’s sermon, invokes the ways that natural inability mitigates spiritual responsibility. Here, though, the pastor puts biology into contact with doctrine: the crook in the brain could be part of a “hereditary or ingrafted organic tendency” towards sin rather than a total lack of mental function. Is it still a natural inability? Honeywood argues that God is obligated to protect humanity, who are not only children but babies compared to divinity, “against the ruin” wrought by inheritance. He thus extends natural inability to heredity. This sermon, Holmes writes, “was really much more respectful to his Maker” than the usual “Oriental hyperboles of self-abasement” (247).

In his letter to Stowe, Holmes writes that Venner herself is an important aspect of his attempt to “stir that mighty question of automatic agency in its relation to self-determination” (Morse 263). In creating a character influenced by the absorption of snake venom in the womb, he writes, he wishes to personalize his theological arguments:

To make the subject of this influence interest the reader, to carry the animalizing of her nature just as far as can be done without rendering her repulsive, to redeem the character in some measure by humanizing traits, which struggle through the lower organic
tendencies, to carry her on to her inevitable fate by the natural machinery of circumstance, grouping many human interests around her, which find their natural solution in the train of events involving her doom,—such is the idea of this story. (Morse 264-65)

The “subject of this influence,” Elsie Venner, is just sympathetic enough to convince readers that she does not deserve to bear judgment for her immoral behavior. She stands in for all of those subject to influences out of their control. Holmes thus hopes that by “humanizing” Venner, he might convince his readers that the doctrine of original sin is unjust.

But, as Jane F. Thralkill argues, the Elsie Venner readers come to know is not human: therefore, humanizing her “would be to deny or even destroy what makes her Elsie” (Holmes ix; Thrailkill 79). And that is precisely what happens in the novel. Langdon includes in a bundle of flowers sent to her leaves from the white ash, rumored to be deadly to snakes (439). When she comes into contact with them, she flings the basket away and faints; thereafter, she loses her snaky traits—the “cold glitter” of her “diamond eyes,” the “stormy scowl” that shades her face—and comes to resemble her mother (441). She also becomes so weak that she cannot leave her bed. The leaves of the white ash purge the “lower nature” of the snake from her body, but Dr. Kittridge fears that the corruption has “involved the centres of life in its own decay” and is killing her (445). Finally, what would seem to restore her supposedly “true,” human self, if one could be said to exist, kills her.

If, according to Holmes’s letter to Stowe, humanizing Venner is part of his larger plan to demonstrate the errors of Calvinism, why does it kill her? One possibility is that he borrows from the death of little Eva and brings his character to maximum sympathetic resonance by ending her life, thus bolstering the work he wishes his novel to perform. But ridding her of her snaky characteristics seems to weaken his theological argument, for doing so suggests that her inherited immoral tendencies are not inherited from her ancestors—she looks like her mother only after
the ophidian part of her deteriorates—but are, echoing pre-1830 theories of heredity, a matter of circumstance. If Venner’s mother had never been bitten, there would be no modification of her daughter’s nature. Because Venner’s case of “moral poisoning” is contingent upon that one event, it is not predetermined in the ways Holmes needs it to be for it to stand as a metaphor for original sin: it is not inevitable, nor is it applicable to all humanity. In Calvinist terms, although one might grant that Elsie Venner’s nature is compromised to the point of natural inability, that says nothing about the damned whose mothers were not bitten by snakes. And is true that, insofar as original sin partly consists of a corruption of human nature caused by a serpent, Venner’s case fits. But the novel describes Elsie’s inherited traits as the immediate effect of her mother’s encounter with the snake rather than, say, her grandmother’s; if the serpent bit “Eve before the birth of Cain,” we might expect Cain to exhibit snakelike qualities, but not necessarily his children.

I voice these discrepancies not to resolve them but to suggest that Holmes’s use of the allegorical mode in *Elsie Venner* detracts from his goal of calling original sin into question. As I have discussed, Kittredge and Honeywood think in terms of biological heredity, and they both explore, however briefly, what that means for original sin. But the novel places most of its persuasive weight on the allegorical figure of Venner, which leaves its argumentative thrust contingent upon the unusual, singular circumstances of her gestation. Holmes is successful in his goal to “write a story with enough of interest in its characters and incidents to attract a certain amount of popular attention,” but one speculates that his efforts to make the reptilian Venner and her story interesting distracted both him and his readers from the force of his theological reasoning (Morse 264).
Holmes seems to have realized this issue, for in prefaces to subsequent editions of *Elsie Venner* in 1883 and 1891 he recasts it as something other than a “romance” in which he uses “poetic license” in his depiction of “a grave scientific doctrine,” as his first preface characterizes the novel. In the second preface, he writes that the novel was written to “test the doctrine of ‘original sin’ and human responsibility for the disordered volition coming under that technical denomination” (ix). And in the third preface, he writes that it “was not written for popularity, but with a very serious purpose,” that purpose being “to make a case for poor Elsie, whom the most hardened theologian would find it hard to blame for her inherited ophidian tastes and tendencies” (xii). These later prefaces, published twenty-four and thirty-two years after *The Atlantic* first began publishing what was then *The Professor’s Story*, mark the cultural shifts wrought by Darwin and the rise of literary realism in the intervening period. Darwin’s theory of evolution fostered the perceived explanatory power of heredity in ascendant human sciences such as anthropology, sociology, and criminology. At the same time, literary realists such as Émile Zola, who famously compared his literary method to that of “the physiologist and the experimental doctor,” sought to represent reality objectively and immediately, cultivating an overt identification with science (25). Thus Holmes’s generic shift in the second preface from romance to “test” and the shift in the third preface to “case”: he tames the messiness and poetic license of his romance first by casting it as a test or experiment, a Zolaesque dissection of the real, and then as a case or argument.

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These generic shifts, I argue, reveal the work of literature as a medium for representing, framing, and disseminating heredity’s repercussions for original sin. *Elsie Venner* the romance, as the novel’s first preface and Holmes’s letter to Stowe makes clear, covers its speculations about heredity under the fabric of plot and character—a relationship akin to that between a fishing hook and the bait impaled on it. But in *Elsie Venner* the “test,” the hook and the bait are the same thing, for the narrative itself is the test. This is to say that in reimagining his novel as a sort of experiment, Holmes figures literary representation as a controlled environment in which the repercussions of hypothetical situations (a part-snake teenager, for example) might be discovered and observed with something close to the veracity of real life. At the same time, the shift marks heredity’s new, post-Darwin status as a science prominent enough to be the subject of a popular novel. Yet for the reasons I have already outlined, the very elements that make *Elsie Venner* a romance—the unusual, even fantastical circumstances surrounding Venner’s personality, her role as an allegorical figure, and so on—make it at best a messy experiment. Holmes needed more than a preface to turn his romance into an experiment: he needed a new novel altogether.

**Inherited Impulses**

*Elsie Venner* was successful enough that William Ticknor, a publisher of *The Atlantic*, asked Holmes to write another novel, a proposition to which the physician agreed. Throughout 1867, Ticknor led every issue of the magazine with an installment of the new work, *The Guardian Angel* (published in book form November 1867) (Tilton 284). The first preface to the novel explains Holmes’s view of its relation to *Elsie Venner*, which he writes was predicated upon “an experiment which some thought cruel, even on paper” (v). The new tale “forms a natural sequence” to *Elsie Venner*, he writes, making *The Guardian Angel* something of an
answer to or development of its sibling novel (v). He says that although the earlier novel posed an outlandish situation to explore original sin, The Guardian Angel “comes more nearly within the range of common experience” (vi). Instead of relying on the deleterious moral effects of a prenatal snakebite to demonstrate responsibility’s limits, Holmes here draws on human heredity, or “inherited bodily aspects and habitudes,” the existence and effects of which are obvious (he says) to all who observe them (vi).

Though the premise of The Guardian Angel is more mundane than its sibling novel, both might still be called, he writes, “Studies of the Reflex Function in its higher sphere” or “protests against the scholastic tendency to shift the total responsibility of all human action from the Infinite to the finite” (vii). But doing so, he jokes, “might alarm the jealousy of the cabinet-keepers of our doctrinal museums” (vii). As his poke at “doctrinal museums” suggests, Holmes anticipated a backlash similar to that inspired by his earlier writing (vii). He attempts to nip the familiar complaint that he abolishes moral responsibility in the bud: anyone who confuses his “the doctrine of limited responsibility” for a denial of self-determination and responsibility altogether is one of the country’s many “intellectual half-breeds” (vii). If we “cannot follow the automatic machinery of nature into the mental and moral world,” we might as well embrace our backwardness and “return at once to our old demonology” (vii). The Guardian Angel, then, promises to depict the machinery of nature (heredity, especially) as limiting but not eliminating responsibility.

Holmes writes of the snake venom’s influence on Venner that “[w]hether anything like this ever happened, or was possible, mattered little” because he wanted to explore “the limitations of human responsibility in a simple and effective way” (vi). But, as I have discussed, the question of whether a case like Venner’s is possible is important to the success of Holmes’s
theological argument if he wants that argument to be predicated upon a realistic “experiment” in human responsibility. I argue that *The Guardian Angel*, “more nearly within the range of common experience” and founded on what is to Holmes the everyday mechanism of biological heredity, attempts to be what *Elsie Venner* was not written to be: an experiment, in sync with and made possible by contemporary science, in human responsibility. By founding its depiction of inherited tendencies on biological heredity instead of the circumstances of one snakebite, I argue, the novel articulates the “doctrine of limited responsibility” in such a way that it applies to all humanity. The shift to literary realism and its affinities with science, then, enables Holmes to frame the results of his narrative experiment as applicable not only to the narrative’s characters but to the reader. Further, I argue, biological heredity comes more near to engaging Calvinist theology on its own terms, for it was believed to be constitutive of human nature (including its natural limitations). And it does not require the heroine, Myrtle Hazard, to pay for self-determination with her life: after she masters her inherited tendencies, she enjoys the beginning of a happy marriage.

Like Holmes’s other novels, *The Guardian Angel* takes place in a bucolic New England village, (here, Oxbow), populated by charming if sometimes flat characters. Readers are introduced to Hazard, the novel’s case study in biological heredity, through her ancestors. This is because it is, as the narrator says, not “certain that our individual personality is the single inhabitant of these our corporeal frames”: some of us “have cotenants in this house we live in,” and it is best to familiarize oneself with as much of the household as possible (22). The dead, Holmes writes, might find within their descendants “a kind of secondary and imperfect, yet self-conscious life,” which leads to our detecting at one time “the look, at another the tone of voice, at another some characteristic movement of this or that ancestor” (22). To know Hazard, then, is
to know Ann Holyoake, a sixteenth-century Protestant burned at the stake by Catholics; Major Gideon Withers, a pompous, bombastic American of the eighteenth century; his son David, a sensitive aesthete of Poe’s mold; his wife Judith Pride, a flirtatious beauty; her daughter-in-law, Virginia Wild, who is part American Indian; and Wild’s son-in-law, Captain Charles Hazard, Myrtle’s dead father, who loves the sea (24-26). Candace, Wild’s daughter and Charles Hazard’s wife, gives birth to Myrtle in India, and while she is still an infant both parents die of disease (26). A relative in India brings her back to America to be raised in New England. Hazard, then, is subject to the influence of an extraordinarily varied family tree. At few points of the story does Holmes make it clear which ancestors predominate at which times; he keeps their influence subtle enough that the reader must keep them all in mind to distinguish one’s characteristics from another’s.

These ancestors’ “instincts and qualities” lie within Hazard “in embryo” in much the same way as when a tree bears grafts from many others:

It is as when several grafts, bearing fruit that ripens at different times, are growing upon the same stock. Her earlier impulses may have been derived directly from her father and mother, but all the ancestors who have been mentioned, and more or less obscurely many others, came uppermost in their time, before the absolute and total result of their several forces had found its equilibrium in the character by which she was to be known as an individual. These inherited impulses were therefore many, conflicting, some of them dangerous. (26-27)

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73 Boewe notes that Holmes explores the grafted tree figure even more forcefully in The Poet at the Breakfast-Table: “You have seen a tree with different grafts upon it, an apple or a pear tree we will say … It is the same thing with ourselves, but it takes us a long while to find it out. The various inherited instincts ripen in succession. You may be nine tenths paternal at one period of your life, and nine tenths maternal at another. All at once the traits of some immediate ancestor may come to maturity unexpectedly on one of the branches of your character, just as your features at different periods of your life betray different resemblances to your nearer or more remote relatives” (Holmes, Works III: 165-66, qtd. in Boewe, Heredity 190).
Key to Holmes’s figure of the grafted tree is the idea that the different grafts bear fruit that “ripens at different times” despite “growing upon the same stock” (26). This image dramatizes the biological concept of latent heredity, in which inherited traits express themselves at different points of their descendants’ lives. Even Hazard’s more distant ancestors might thus, in Holmes’s words, “come uppermost in their time” before their descendant attains “equilibrium” (27). That her “inherited impulses” are “many, conflicting, some of them dangerous” makes her inner life a site of conflict and incoherence (27). Her personal development depends upon cohering her inherited tendencies into a stable character while under the constant threat of a latent characteristic showing itself. The process of learning how to do so drives the plot. Holmes here poses biological heredity as a sort of “problem” in that it affects Hazard in ways that limit her responsibility, but it is a problem with a solution: by attaining “equilibrium,” Hazard might assimilate her competing hereditary traits into a whole personality. This means that just as Holmes creates new ways of thinking about heredity’s ethical and religious ramifications, he also makes it possible to think of the body as trainable and malleable in ways that mitigate heredity’s effects. In *The Guardian Angel*, then, Holmes posits heredity as a sort of temporary determinism, one strong enough to raise potent questions about responsibility but plastic enough that it can be tamed.

Secondary characters abound in the novel, including the wannabe poet Gifted Hopkins and Hazard’s naïve friend Susan Posey, but the most important character other than Hazard (and perhaps the novel’s real protagonist) is Byles Gridley, an “old Master of Arts” and a bachelor who retires to Oxbow after a career as a professor (2). Holmes invests many of his own traits into Gridley: both are men of letters, great talkers, and critics of theological dogma (3). For example,________________________________________

74 Latent heredity helps enable latecentury discourses about atavism, or the regression to behaviors and mental states characteristic of evolutionary anterior species.
Gridley goes to the local Calvinist church precisely because he disagrees with its doctrines: he "liked to go there so as to growl to himself through the sermon, and go home scolding all the way about it" (3). Despite his cantankerous personality, he develops a grandfatherly affection for Hazard after learning of her difficulties. As the novel progresses, he guides her through the challenges raised by her inherited tendencies, and by the conclusion he is revealed to be the eponymous guardian angel.

The plot of *The Guardian Angel* concerns a series of mishaps Hazard encounters due to her inherited tendencies. The novel begins with Gridley finding in his newspaper an advertisement placed by Hazard’s guardian and aunt, Silence Withers, “a shadowy, pinched, sallow, dispirited, bloodless woman” (13). The advertisement says that Hazard, “tall and womanly for her age,” has gone missing (6). Withers and her maiden second cousin, Cynthia Badlam, live with their Irish servant, Kitty Fagan, and Hazard in their ancestral home, the Poplars. Withers worries that Hazard has run away with a man, but her worry is not for ward’s sake but her own: she would rather “know that she was dead, and had died in the Lord” than for her to be “living in sin, or dead in wrong-doing” because, she thinks, the sin would reflect on herself (14). What will happen, she wonders, “when ‘He maketh inquisition for blood’?” (14).

Her “engine,” the narrator later remarks, is “responsibility,—her own responsibility, and the dreadful consequences which would follow to her, Silence, if Myrtle should in any way go wrong” (76). To protect her responsibility, her spiritual training of Hazard consists of “going to meeting three times every Sabbath day, and knowing the catechism by heart, and reading of good

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75 That Hazard and Withers do not resemble each other could be attributed to Wither’s being only half-sister to Hazard’s mother.

76 Psalm 9:12 (*KJV*): “When he maketh inquisition for blood, he remembereth them: he forgetteth not the cry of the humble.”
books, and the best of daily advice” (14). Withers’ unceasing concern for her own responsibility even at the cost of her ward’s life dramatizes what Holmes views as the folly and cruelty of the doctrine of original sin—Withers’ belief that Hazard’s responsibility might fall on her shoulders makes her callous about the young woman’s well-being in a way that mirrors theologians’ damning of children to perdition. In her desperation to be Godly, Holmes suggests, Withers forgets to be good.

Readers discover in time that Hazard has run away from the Poplars because of a sudden urge to go to sea. She spends her days gazing at a river visible from her home, and one day “it appeared all at once as a Delivered” (73). Like all rivers, it leads to the ocean, “the great highway of the world,” and eventually to “the gates of those cities from which she could take her departure unchallenged” (73). Her urge to travel is sparked by her discovery a few months before of “some sea-shells and coral-fans, and dried star-fishes and sea-horses, and a natural mummy of a rough-skinned dogfish” (75). These items strike a “dangerous chord” within her, and she feels “impelled” to examine them; doing so the smell of the sea clinging to them reaches “the very inmost haunts of memory” and stirs her urge to go to sea (75). Soon after, Withers comments that she is beginning to look like her father, a ship’s captain (76). Here, Holmes suggests that the hereditary legacy of Hazard’s seagoing father becomes a powerful influence on her behavior after her discovery of the seashells triggers its emergence. She flees her home by cutting her hair short, which masculinizes her and makes her look even more like her father, and stealing a boat (82-83).

As Hazard drifts, her boat wanders into a marsh known by locals as the “Witches’ Hollow,” where she experiences a vision that dramatizes how her heredity affects her. She sees a burning cross and the ghostly figures of her ancestors, each one solid in proportion to how
closely he or she is related to her: her parents’ figures are more clear than her grandparents’, for example (90). She sees them silently mouthing the word “Breath,” as if “they wanted to breathe the air of the world again in my shape, which I seemed to see as it were empty of myself and of these other selves, like a sponge that has water pressed out of it” (90). Soon, “it seemed to me that I returned to myself, and then those others became part of me by being taken up, one by one, and so lost in my own life” (90). She inherits the tendencies of several ancestors in particular. Her parents become part of her, imparting to her their “longing to live over the life they had led, on the sea and in strange countries” (90). Major Withers, the boisterous, hard-drinking eighteenth-century American, possesses characteristics that Hazard does not want any part of, but “there was some right he had in me through my being of his blood, and so his health and his strength went all through me, and I was always to have what was left of his life in that shadow-like shape, forming a portion of mine” (90). She feels the influence of Judith Pride, famous for her beauty and flirtatiousness; Ruth Bradford, burned as a witch in the seventeenth century; an unnamed American Indian woman, whose ghost is “wild-looking” and wearing a “head-dress of feathers”; and Anne Holyake, “burned long ago by the Papists,” whom Hazard feels is her “guardian and protector” (90-91). Each of these figures, Hazard says, “really live over some part of their past lives in my life” (91).

This scene models Holmes shift to the realist mode, for he refuses to let Hazard’s mysterious experience remain mysterious. A note by Gridley follows Hazard’s vision, which he says “must be accounted for in some way, or pass into the category of the supernatural” (92). This accounting models Holmes’s approach to heredity in *The Guardian Angel*—his impulse is to ensure that everything is explained scientifically. To leave the seemingly supernatural unexamined by science would be to leave it entirely in the hands of mystics and theologians, i.e.
those who Holmes views as obfuscating rather than illuminating reality. Gridley guesses that her vision “was one of those intuitions, with objective projection, which sometimes comes to imaginative young persons, especially girls, in certain exalted nervous conditions” (92). He proceeds to translate the supernatural into the natural, articulating his view of heredity:

The lives of our progenitors are, as we know, reproduced in different proportions in ourselves. Whether they as individuals have any consciousness of it, is another matter. It is possible that they do get a second of as it were fractional life in us. It might seem that many of those whose blood flows in our veins struggle for the mastery, and by and by one or more get the predominance, so that we grow to be like father, or mother, or remoter ancestor, or two or more are blended in us, not to the exclusion, however, it must be understood, of a special personality of our own, about which these others are grouped.Independently of any possible scientific value, this 'Vision' serves to illustrate the above-mentioned fact of common experience, which is not sufficiently weighed by most moralists. (92)

Gridley, Holmes’s avatar in the novel, has two points here. One is that Hazard’s vision is not mystical but rather a psychological projection of the fact of inherited influences, a fact, he says, established by both science and experience. The entire vision, then, can be understood in a way that does not ask us “to suppose any exceptional occurrence outside of natural laws” (93). Acknowledging the presence of “a special personality of our own” around which one’s inherited tendencies “are grouped” provides a normative picture of heredity that provides a possible endpoint for Hazard’s story. The second point Gridley makes, articulated by Holmes elsewhere, is that inherited influences are not enough acknowledged by moralists as factors that limit the will. Here Holmes argues that the very thing Calvinists say preserves Adam’s responsibility for his sin, i.e. the nature he and his descendants share, instead mitigates that responsibility.

Hazard’s escape by boat, which concludes when she hit rapids and is found unconscious in a downstream town, sets a pattern repeated throughout the novel. Her inexplicably dangerous actions seem to the community at large the work of a sinful nature, but readers hear from Gridley, the village physician, the narrator, or some other person learned in science that she acts
the way she does because of her heredity. And moralists and theologians, these characters emphasize, ought to recognize that physical condition as something that mitigate her responsibility. To think in terms of Calvinist theology, the novel presents her inherited tendencies as being part of her physical, not her spiritual, makeup, so what at first appears to be a moral corruption of her nature is actually a natural, physiological limitation. The issue, as the narrator of The Guardian Angel complains, is that ministers think “that the treatment of all morbid states of mind short of raving madness belongs to them and not to the doctors” (142). After all, Cotton Mather attributed New England’s preponderance of “Splenetic Maladies” and “Melancholy Indispositions” to the “unsearchable Judgments of God” (153). Haze...
there be, who believes in the absolute independence and self-determination of the will, and the consequent total responsibility of every human being for every irregular nervous action and ill-governed muscular contraction, may as well lay down this narrative” (129). Otherwise, “he may lose all faith in poor Myrtle Hazard, and all patience with the writer who tells her story” (129). What follows, then, will depict the limitations of the will.

Hazard’s hysteria manifests as an attraction to Dr. Hurlbut’s middle-aged son, Fordyce. She becomes subject to strong headaches, and only his touch removes her pain; when he soothes “her strange, excited condition,” she fixes “her wandering thoughts upon him” (131, 133). Soon, her will loses its “power,” and “‘I cannot help it’—the hysteric motto—” becomes her refrain (133). Her hysteria causes her to “undergo[] a singular change of her moral nature”: whereas before she ‘had been a truthful child,” at this point “she seemed to have lost the healthy instincts for veracity and honesty. She feigned all sorts of odd symptoms, and showed a wonderful degree of cunning in giving an appearance of truth to them” so that she might see Fordyce more often (133). She comes to depend on the doctor’s constant care, and in time the two begin to have romantic feelings for one another. Nurse Byloe, Fordyce’s assistant, goes to Gridley for his help, telling him that “this gal ain’t Myrtle Hazard no longer” and that Hurlbut is “gettin’ a little bewitched” by her (137). Gridley solves the problem by inviting Hurlbut to his home, reading the Oath of Hippocrates to him, and asking him bluntly whether he is “in danger of violating the sanctities of your honorable calling, and leading astray a young person committed to your sacred keeping” (140). The physician agrees that he has been careless, and from that point his elderly father sees the teenager instead: after three days of nervous attacks, she returns to a healthy state (141).
This episode illustrates Holmes’s approach to treating those whose inherited tendencies drive them to immorality. The afflicted individual cannot help him or herself because a person who is affected enough to need help probably does not have the willpower necessary to achieve self-determination. Whereas dietary reformers sought to put the tools of self-determination in the hands of the individual, Holmes depicts heredity as out of the individual’s control. In The Guardian Angel, it falls to the community to provide treatment, which consists of protecting the afflicted from harm until his or her hereditary influences cohere with his or her own personality into an individual character. A community should thus approach a person with inherited immoral tendencies with mercy, not punishment or derision.

After Hazard develops “the instincts of the coquette, or at least of the city belle” due to the influence of her worldly ancestor Judith Pride, she becomes “conscious of her gifts of fascination, and seemed to please herself with the homage of her rustic admirers” (253). She, Withers, and Gridley agree that she should leave the village for more schooling, and Gridley offers some money to send her to “Madam Delacoste’s institution for young ladies” where she will find no “rustic admirers” (253). But there she imbibes the ways of the rich and fashionable, and her inclination to flaunt her beauty grows. Pride’s influence only wanes when that of Hazard’s American Indian ancestor grows. The school holds a party featuring living tableaux, and Hazard is chosen to play the part of Pocahontas in a few scenes (271). As she dresses for the part, her Native ancestor surfaces in her consciousness:

She felt herself carried back into the dim ages when the wilderness was yet untrodden save by the feet of its native lords. Think of her wild fancy as we may, she felt as if that dusky woman of her midnight vision on the river were breathing for one hour through her lips. If this belief had lasted, it is plain enough where it would have carried her. But it came into her imagination and vivifying consciousness with the putting on of her unwonted costume, and might well leave her when she put it off. It is not for us, who tell only what happened, to solve these mysteries of the seeming admission of unhoused souls into the fleshly tenements belonging to air-breathing personalities. (272).
Hazard’s first scene as Pocahontas, in which she holds a knife to cut the cords binding John Smith’s hands, is so well-received that someone in the audience throws a wreath to her, which enrages another student who had expected the accolade (273). In “a spasm of jealous passion,” she tears the wreath from Hazard’s hands and stomps on it just as the curtain rises for the next scene (273). Screaming “a cry which some said had the blood-chilling tone of an Indian’s battle-shriek,” Hazard pins her assailant to the ground and raises the knife to strike her, but she suddenly flings the knife away (274). If the incident had gone further, the narrator comments, the evening “would have been treated in full in all the works on medical jurisprudence published throughout the limits of Christendom” (272). Unlike the other incidents, though, Gridley is not around to help her; she has learned through experience how to limit her ancestors’ deleterious influence on her own. The movement of The Guardian Angel, then, is towards a greater, not a lesser, degree of self-determination. If Calvinism “assumes the necessity of the extermination of instincts which were given to be regulated,” then Holmes seeks to delineate how they might be molded and governed (Autocrat 42).

Hazard gains full self-determination only through her work as a nurse in the Civil War. It is surprising, given that the novel spans roughly 1859-1865, that the Civil War does not take up a larger share of the text. Only fifty of its roughly four hundred and twenty pages remain when, in a chapter titled “Just as You Expected,” the narrator announces that “The spring of 1861 had now arrived,—that eventful spring which was to lift the curtain and show the first scene of the first act in the mighty drama which fixed the eyes of mankind during four bloody years” (367). After the fall of Fort Sumter, the men of Oxbow organize and march to war (373). By this point Hazard has been guided through many problems caused by her inherited tendencies and has learned how to regulate her impulses.
The outbreak of the war completes the harmonization of Hazard’s competing ancestral influences. She acquires “womanly endurance” in the face of conflict, for “a great cause makes great souls” (405). Her only wish, thereafter, is to “help the soldiers and their families” (406). In two paragraphs, her beau Clement Lindsay, a pleasant and colorless man from a nearby town, rises from the rank of Captain to Major and then to Colonel, and Hazard marries him and follows him to the front (406-7). From that point until the war’s conclusion, she becomes a nurse and “passe[s] her time between the life of the tent and the life of the hospital” (407). Her ministrations “performed for the sick and the wounded and the dying” remove the last traces of “the dross of her nature”: “[t]he conflict of mingled lives in her blood had ceased” (407).

By dramatizing how even the most combative “conflict of mingled lives” might be stilled with communal support and the acquisition of new habits, Holmes calls into question whether those damned by heredity need remain so. Two years after the publication of *The Guardian Angel*, J. Bruce Thompson, surgeon at Scotland’s General Prison and an early eugenicist, wrote in his article “The Hereditary Nature of Crime” that crime is “generally committed by criminals hereditarily disposed to it”; therefore, he writes, it is incurable (164). He views heredity as a concrete part of an individual’s character. He concludes that crime is “a moral disease of a chronic and congenital nature, intractable in the extreme, because transmitted from generation to generation” (167). That Thompson, whose work is favorably quoted by physiologist Théodule Ribot in *Heredity* (1875), views hereditary behavior as unchangeable demonstrates his similarity to orthodox Calvinist theologians who view humans as damned from birth. Just as Thompson theorizes the existence of a hereditary “criminal class” who are “born in crime,” Hodge and those like him envision the unelect as justly punished for having sinned in Adam’s loins (167). In his
novels, however, Holmes demonstrates how heredity may be called upon to serve both justice and mercy.
CODA: MORAL INTERVENTIONS

Resonating throughout this dissertation has been the rhythmic push and pull between determinism and freedom—between, for example, the sense expressed in Sheppard Lee that embodiment curtails personal autonomy and Sylvester Graham’s sense that embodiment enables new forms of deliberative self-improvement. Fiction, I have argued, made it possible for nineteenth-century Americans to participate in this rhythm, to be affected by it, to work out what it means for the moral and spiritual dimensions of their lives, and ultimately to add their own cadences.

Today, neuroscience (or, more specifically, neuroscientific ways of thinking) pose to Americans some of the same questions about vice and virtue that phrenologists and physiologists posed in the nineteenth century. A raft of popular science books have introduced to twenty-first-century American culture the idea that the brain holds answers to persistent quandaries about responsibility, culpability, and the life well lived; examples include Dean Buonomano’s *Brain Bugs: How the Brain’s Flaws Shape Our Lives* (2011), David Eagleman’s *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (2011), and Joshua Greene’s *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (2013). Proponents of neurolaw, an interdisciplinary field that seeks to apply neuroscience to the law, ask whether fMRI scans of the brain might contribute to what David Eagleman, in an article in *The Atlantic* that as of this writing has been shared more than seventeen thousand times on Facebook, calls “a more biologically informed jurisprudence” by offering judges and juries glimpses into individuals’ neural activity, understood as the biological index to their cognitive capacities, and, ultimately, their culpability or inculpability ("The Brain
on Trial”). (I can only imagine that Holmes would be pleased to see such an argument expressed in *The Atlantic*). I am unequipped to adjudicate the validity of such claims, but I wish to bring to attention how they enable Americans to inquire, as nineteenth-century Americans did, into the ethical and spiritual repercussions of emerging ways of understanding human biology.

How might twenty-first-century Americans navigate the questions posed by the application of brain scanning and other techniques to matters of vice and virtue? Hannah Foster and Herman Melville might provide some answers. These and other nineteenth-century American writers, as I have argued, took physiology and the controversies it provoked as opportunities to create imaginative spaces in which readers might discover new worlds of ethical and religious experience. In doing so, they positioned fiction as a way to shape readers’ values (a function critics already recognize as foundational to seduction narratives and evangelical fiction) and to enable readers to work through physiology’s metaphysical implications. For its readers, nineteenth-century fiction was thus, like the practices of habit-building and dietary regulation it dramatizes, a way to intervene in one’s own moral being. Might fiction-reading be a way to do so today? Some, especially in the neurosciences, are beginning to think so. Yet I would suggest that turning to fiction to sort out the new ethical possibilities offered by neuroscientific ways of thinking is a move pioneered in the nineteenth century.

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