WRITING THE REVOLUTION: RADICALISM AND THE U.S.
HISTORICAL ROMANCE, 1835-1860

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ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Philip Gura)

This dissertation examines popular fictions that employed the history and
iconography of the American Revolution to promote radical reform movements in the
antebellum United States. The project challenges common critical assumptions that
historical fictions—and particularly those drawing upon Revolutionary history—are
inherently nostalgic and capable of conveying only a limited range of political meanings.
Rather than conservative efforts to preserve Revolutionary history, many works of this type
were extensions of their authors’ progressive reform efforts. These historical fictions sought
to recruit readers to the cause of completing the democratizing work of the Revolution in
order to ensure that the people maintained control over their own institutions.

The project considers works by authors who circulated among groups and parties that
contributed to the democratic tumult of the antebellum period, including Catharine Maria
Sedgwick, George Lippard, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher
Stowe. As members—either centrally or peripherally—of opposition political parties,
unions, and reform groups, these authors spoke on behalf of, or were received as engaging
with, campaigns for labor reform, socialism, and abolitionism. Situating these texts within
contemporary radical reform movements reveals that they explicitly endorsed policies such
as labor reform, socialism, or abolitionism. Even texts by supposedly moderate writers provoked enthusiastic responses from radicals—and chagrin or outrage from conservatives.

Reading these texts in light of the controversies and contestations that permeated antebellum culture enables us to recover their radical potential. By re-imagining the past, authors infused their version of Revolutionary history with their own political concerns. This project uncovers within this supposedly conservative genre calls for pension reform for veterans, democratized suffrage, debt relief measures, the formation of unions and socialist cooperatives, and the abolition of slavery. It concludes by examining the dissolution or breakdown of the genre as America neared Civil War and it became increasingly evident that violence, rather than print culture, would be necessary to resolve the nation’s divisions.
To Mary and Al Eska
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Race, Revolution, and Artisan Republicanism in Catharine Sedgwick’s <em>The Linwoods</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>“History is not for such as you”: George Lippard’s Socialist Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Tearing Down the Self-Made Man: Reversals of Fortune in Herman Melville’s <em>Israel Potter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>“The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”: Citizenship and the Right of Revolution in William Cooper Nell’s <em>The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution</em> and Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>“We are the ones all sides are willing to give up”: False Republicans and Black Revolutionaries in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s <em>Dred</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

On the morning of July 4, 1825, the Marquis de Lafayette boarded a ferry in lower Manhattan and crossed the East River to Brooklyn. Manhattan had been seized with a spirit of celebration. A midnight cannonade signaled the start of the fiftieth anniversary of independence, and, upon leaving his lodgings shortly after eight o’clock, Lafayette’s secretary, Auguste Lavasseur, noted that “the streets, the public places, and the entrances to the churches, were thronged with people and the air resounded with thanksgiving” (2:217). In Brooklyn, “the weather was very fine,” a resident later recalled. “All the school and Sunday school children of Brooklyn were congregated at the lower end of Fulton Street, and marshaled into two lines, facing inward, with a wide space between them” (Whitman “Apprentices” 122). In this fashion they awaited the General’s landing.

Earlier that morning, “the officers and magistrates of New York and of Brooklyn, [had] presented themselves at the General’s lodgings, with a numerous procession of citizens,” and made the following appeal:

“We wish,” said they, “that this day of glorious memory may be every year marked by some deed which may have for its object the confirmation of the liberty we owe to the courage of our fathers, and the institutions we owe to their wisdom. We are this day to lay the foundations of an institution that will contribute to this end, as it aids in propagating knowledge among that class of young persons who, by the labour of their hands, contribute so powerfully to the prosperity of our country. A library for the use of artisans is about to be erected in Brooklyn heights, at the expense of funds contributed by our citizens. Let Lafayette lay the cornerstone, and the
With Lafayette’s consent, the company moved on to Brooklyn, where, “in the presence of a
great concourse of citizens,” the General laid the cornerstone. After the ceremony, he
returned to Manhattan, “followed by companies of journeymen tailors, shoemakers, bakers,
stone-masons, cutlers, cooperers, [and] riggers…preceded by their banners….” (2:217).

In the early 1860s a writer for the Brooklyn Standard recounted the history of the
mechanics’ library in a column on “Brooklyniana.” The paper’s correspondent had been, at
the time of Lafayette’s visit, “a lad in his seventh year, [and] remembers the occasion
perfectly well, having been present at it” (Whitman “Apprentices” 121-22). According to the
account in the Standard, the dedication ceremony was a decentralized and decidedly
democratic affair. Though Lafayette led the procession from the ferry stop up to the site at
the corner of Henry and Cranberry streets and took his place “in the center of a group of
veterans and some of the functionaries of Brooklyn,” the beginning of the ceremony “awaited
the arrival, and getting in order, of the children and the rest of the procession” (123). The
logistics of the construction site posed certain challenges; “the heaps of stone and earth
around,” coupled with the General’s passing down into the excavation to lay the stone upon
the foundation, made providing the children with an adequate view a difficult task.
Eventually several men took it upon themselves “to lift the smaller fry down the banks of the
cellar, and place them in safe positions, etc., so that they might have a fair share in the view
and hearing of the exercises” (123). Lafayette himself, “the old companion of Washington,”
likewise assisted the children in gaining favorable positions. “As good luck would have it,”
the account continues, “the writer of this series was one of those whom Lafayette took in his
arms, and lifted down to be provided with a standing place; and proud enough as he was of it
at the time, it may well be imagined with what feelings the venerable gentleman recollects it now” (123). The writer—the boy in Lafayette’s arms—was Walt Whitman.

Whitman suffused his “Brooklynniana” columns for the Standard with Revolutionary lore.¹ The American retreat across the East River following the Battle of Brooklyn, the deadly prison ships anchored off of the Battery, and the mass graves of fallen Americans—dug at the site of the Brooklyn Naval Yard—all prominently factored in a series whose aim (as declared in the headline of the first number) was “Preserving Traditions” (1). The idea of Walt Whitman, the self-professed mechanic and radical, being committed to such a task may strike modern readers as curious. The associations that inform much contemporary analysis of patriotic display—it’s nostalgia and orientation toward consensus—do not comport with those aspects of Whitman’s personality that we celebrate—his bearing toward the future and reveling in dissent. Is Whitman’s account of Lafayette’s visit to Brooklyn a mere hegemonic moment, an incident of incorporating mechanics into the nation’s middle-class vision, an instance in which his boundless enthusiasm gives way to jingoism? Or could his account represent a counter-tradition, or a more complex tradition, in which the mechanics could claim a central role in the republic?

During much of the antebellum period, the whole of American culture appeared committed to carrying on the Revolutionary legacy. As Whitman wrote of Lafayette’s sojourn in Brooklyn, “The famous Lafayette was then on his last visit to America…. It was a historical event, that last visit, full of solemnity, as most of the old soldiers were dead. A few old veterans still remained, and gathered around Lafayette, here in Brooklyn and New York, at this last visit” (122). The morbid refrain of Whitman’s narration suggests the
psychological burden felt by those younger generations coming into their inheritance as leaders of the nation. The Revolution had been fought not by Whitman’s father’s generation but by his grandfather’s; one of his granduncles, Whitman often boasted, had given his life in the Battle of Brooklyn (Reynolds Whitman 12). Despite the passage of time, the founders—particularly Washington—remained the metaphorical “fathers” of the nation, and, as Russ Castronovo illustrates, the relationship between father and son remained the dominant political metaphor of the mid-nineteenth century (9). So entrenched was the revolutionaries’ influence that “all important political, moral, and personal matters (and many matters that were not so important) were referred to…the heroic standards of the founding period and the lives of the founders themselves” (qtd. in Castronovo 7).

Traditions, of course, are not static quantities. The manner in which Americans honored the surviving revolutionaries, for instance, changed with time and the introduction of new technologies. Lafayette’s tour of the United States in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Revolution provided an opportunity for Americans to see a legend of the era in the flesh. By the time Whitman came to write his columns for the Standard, photographs of those remaining Revolutionary soldiers provided a new medium through which people could engage with their nation’s past. Elias Brewster Hillard produced his book of photographs, The Last Men of the Revolution, in 1864, at which point the notion of preserving the nation’s past—and, indeed, the nation itself—had fundamentally altered amidst civil war. Whitman’s account of Lafayette’s appearance in Brooklyn—itself a re-imagination of a ceremony commemorating the past—took on new resonance in light of the Union’s fracture. At the site of the Mechanics Library, Whitman noted, was “now the City Armory building, resounding these times to the clash of arms, and the nightly orders of the
drill-officers...[to the] hundreds of young men who congregate there to learn soldiering....”
(“Apprentices” 121). The cornerstone laid by Lafayette had been incorporated into the new
structure. “It is a valuable memento,” Whitman wrote, “and our citizens should be more
generally aware of its history.... That stone has been touched by the almost sacred hands of
Lafayette, and is therefore hallowed by associations that, as time rolls on, will every year
become more and more precious” (127).

Those “associations” were multiple and mutable. The narrative of the Revolution
was continually re-framed and re-articulated not only by politicians but also by popular
writers of the antebellum period. By the mid-1830s, the chief “transmitters of [the]
Revolutionary experience,” according to Michael Kammen, were not only orators like
Edward Everett and Daniel Webster, but also authors of romances, particularly James
Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms (21). “By the second quarter of the
nineteenth century,” Kammen contends, “…the American Revolution had passed from the
realm of memory to that of imagination” (Kammen 21). Indeed, by the time Simms
published his first Revolutionary romance, The Partisan, in 1835, he could convincingly
claim that the romance provided the best vehicle for a true impression of the past. “A sober
desire for history—the unwritten, the unconsidered, but veracious history—has been with
me, in this labour, a sort of principle,” he wrote.

The medium through which we now look at these events, is, in some
respects, that of a glass darkened. The characters rise up before us grimly
or indistinctly. We scarcely believe, yet we cannot doubt. The evidence is
closed—the testimony irrefutable—and imagination, however audacious in
her own province, only ventures to imbody and model those features of the
past, which the sober truth has left indistinct, as not within her notice, or
unworthy her regard. (242)

The romance, Simms argued, provided the author with a paradoxical liberty to re-imagine the
past while recovering its true spirit. Consequently, Simms—who, to the bafflement of many
in his native South Carolina, as well as his acquaintances in New York, declared himself a Locofoco partisan—could claim the preoccupations of that movement, particularly the centrality of humble laborers to the nation’s identity, as integral to the Revolutionary struggle. Many of Simms’s contemporaries and subsequent authors would continue in the same endeavor, advancing regional variations on the history of the Revolution, or reinscribing that history so as to promote such cultural endeavors as the formation of unions and cooperatives, the imperialist war with Mexico, and rebellions by European socialists and African slaves.

Despite their popularity during the nineteenth century, Revolutionary romances—like nationalistic and historical fiction more broadly—have fallen out of critical favor. Few of these texts have appeared in new editions or garnered substantial scholarly attention. What treatment they have received has too often been cursory, as critics have been quick to implicate Revolutionary fictions in such conservative projects as imperialism and nation-building without considering the texts’ varied and sometimes contradictory meanings. Revolutionary romances contributed to the process whereby the nation’s past was reconfigured to present ideals and actions that could address the crises that confronted the culture during the antebellum period: the boom-and-bust cycle of the market, deepening class stratification, the nation’s westward expansion, and its reckoning with slavery. By reading these historical fictions as singularly conservative responses to these challenges, part of the nation’s cultural history—particularly a tradition of political dissent—has been obscured.

This project constitutes an effort to recover an important facet of popular political and literary practice from the antebellum period. Revolutionary romances often wielded
influence on a large scale—securing the place of regional events and heroes like Francis Marion within the nation’s collective memory, or fundamentally altering the range of meanings that readers would associate with such icons as the Liberty Bell or George Washington. Some authors of Revolutionary romances were unapologetic activists who used their fiction to further their reform interests, and who would not shy away from such revisionist appropriations as anointing the head of a labor union Supreme Washington. In other cases supposedly moderate writers crafted their romances in such a way—by, for instance, recruiting a former slave to the rebel cause—that raised the hackles of the conservative protectors of the Revolutionary legacy. With time, these contexts of production and consumption—and eventually the texts themselves—were lost. The sheer disparity between the abundance and popularity of antebellum Revolutionary fictions on the one hand and their scarcity and marginalization in modern critical discussions on the other suggests that at some point our readings have gone awry, or that we have failed to sufficiently recover the contours of antebellum reading practices.

Those scholars who have worked to recover the literary values of antebellum readers have struggled to account for this disconnect. In New England Literary Culture, Lawrence Buell puzzles over the “‘absence’ of the Revolution as a literary event in American history” (212). That “absence,” Buell contends, is not the product of a dearth of texts, but rather is due to the failure of the historical scenario to sustain compelling literary drama: “For antebellum New Englanders,” he asserts, the American revolutionaries came too near being “unequivocally right” for their story to spawn anything more than “melodrama” when adapted to a literary milieu (212). (By contrast, the Puritans’ “struggles against Indians and heretics” were sufficiently “troubling” to inspire such talents as Hawthorne to set their
greatest works in the midst of the colonial wilderness (212-23)). The failure of the Revolutionary narrative, Buell concludes, “is perhaps due less to bourgeois suppression of American revolutionary origins…than to the fact that the many attempts at portrayal have been too programmatically simplistic to make it into the American literary canon” (212).

Much of the current mistrust of these narratives stems from a new awareness of nationalism’s contributions to the United States’ culture of imperialism. Critics since the 1950s have justifiably turned a skeptical eye toward texts that laid the imaginative groundwork for Manifest Destiny and the “internal colonialism” that characterized the nation’s foreign and domestic policy (Rowe ix-x). In his groundbreaking study, Richard Slotkin, writing against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, highlights the centrality of acts of violence to the achievement of both an idealized American identity and the United States’ imperial aspirations for the frontier. Slotkin’s analysis powerfully foregrounds the damaging consequences of the nation’s self-narrative. “A people unaware of its myths,” he writes, “is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions” (4-5).

Subsequent works of criticism have uncovered how literature buttressed campaigns of cultural domination; consequently, critics have taken to celebrating those texts that subvert or oppose cultural hegemony. This bifurcated mode of analysis emerged during the 1980s and manifested itself in studies such as Philip Fisher’s *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*. Fisher frames the historical novel “as a practice of mourning and resignation” that enacts “the destruction of the wilderness and the removal of the Indians” (20). Generalizing from the example of Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales, Fisher examines its
“conservative, tragic form,” which “pictures forces as beyond control, already underway, and creates central figures who embody processes they do not control” (18-19). Fisher’s analysis of Cooper’s fiction is indeed convincing and damning; however, his totalizing treatment of the historical novel fails to offer a productive critical model for interrogating the cultural work of Revolutionary romances that depict common people—in addition to, or in place of, Cooper’s natural aristocracy—as powering the campaign for independence.

More recent studies by Shirley Samuels and Russ Castronovo examine how Revolutionary romances helped to promulgate metaphors that could guide readers toward a proper understanding of the social roles and responsibilities of American citizens. These projects break fertile new ground by considering the inextricability of gender and racial hierarchies from antebellum conceptions of the nation. Samuels demonstrates how romances disseminated an ideology of republican motherhood that would stabilize the nation but also represented women whose embodiment threatened that stability. Castronovo further explores the role of family metaphors, particularly the relationship between father and son, in describing the ideal relationship between past and present, and, consequently, in creating a national narrative of cohesion and continuity. Whereas Samuels examines gender as both a constructive and destructive property, Castronovo configures race as the destabilizing quantity that challenges narrative continuity and, by extension, cultural hegemony.

Critics of United States nationalism or of an American “myth,” including Castronovo, assert that any attempt to criticize the nation’s history while invoking the overall structure of that myth is inherently self-defeating. In other words, a narrative that celebrates the success of the Revolution necessarily—though perhaps unconsciously—countenances the oppressive
function of that history. Such totalizing readings of texts, Lora Romero asserts, are an outgrowth of critics’ demands for radical alterity as the only viable form of cultural dissent:

Literary value seems to depend upon identification of idealized agents (authors or intellectuals) who stand outside the social and political ideologies of their time. The construction of this ideal agency also seems to demand the existence of another group (authors, readers) completely without agency vis-à-vis these same ideologies. Indeed, that group’s utter subjection is just the inverse of the exaggerated agency given to the idealized author. (5)

Such critical standards configure patriotic celebration as equivalent to capitulation to the power structure, and, by extension, implicate Revolutionary romances as bolstering that power structure. According to this reading, Revolutionary romances could only emerge from the conservative impulses of their authors, or else serve as examples of satire. Similarly, readers who devoured such texts would have to be conservative themselves or else dupes deprived of political self-awareness. The consequence of our current critical paradigms, Romero contends, is that “We seem unable to entertain the possibility that traditions, or even individual texts, could be radical on some issues (market capitalism, for example) and reactionary on others (gender or race, for instance)” (4).

This project reopens the copious archive of antebellum Revolutionary romances to consider the myriad political commitments that gave rise to those texts. The study opens in 1835, when the Revolutionary generation almost to a man had passed on, leaving their inheritors with both a sense of responsibility to preserve the nation’s liberty and a sense of freedom to re-imagine the meaning of liberty within the shifting contexts of the period. The authors I examine moved and wrote in circles that made radical use of the past, thereby opening their representations of the Revolution to progressive interpretation. Even supposedly moderate authors generated texts that provoked enthusiastic responses from radicals—and chagrin or outrage from conservatives.
These texts were not escapist fiction; they did not retreat to an idealized past immune to economic depression and the ravages of industrialization and slavery. Instead, many Revolutionary romances used the heroic figures and narratives of the past to promote tangible and progressive responses to the inequalities and iniquities of antebellum society. Rather than nostalgic counterweights to the social and political upheaval of the period, Revolutionary romances often theorized transformation. By re-imagining the past, they inscribed it with contemporary political initiatives, including pension reforms for veterans, democratized suffrage, debt relief measures, the formation of unions and socialist cooperatives, and the abolition of slavery. Reading these texts in light of the controversies and contestations that permeated antebellum culture, enables us to recover their radical potential.

Key to recovering that potential is the task of breaking through the “superficial consensus” of early American political discourse (Wilentz *Chants* 61). This illusion of consensus emerged from the ubiquity of republicanism—the belief that private interests should be subordinate to the public good—within that discourse. Despite the founders’ efforts to frame the Revolution as embodying republican ideals, no post-war consensus existed as to how to translate those ideals into government institutions. Recent historical scholarship has uncovered the platforms and practices of the era’s myriad (and often short-lived) political parties to reveal that Americans “fought passionately over the fundamentals of their own Revolution” well into the nineteenth century (61). Indeed, during the period of this study—1835 to 1856—republicanism was used to justify new definitions of the public good, and, consequently, who was best equipped to shape the future of the nation.
Whitman’s description of the cornerstone ceremony, for example, echoes the values of the “artisan republicanism” that inflected New York’s Democracy during the 1820s and 1830s, that inspired the formation of the radical Locofoco party in 1835, and that contributed to the “democratic insurgency” by which common people gained a greater stake in their government during the antebellum period (Wilentz Rise 37). As David Waldstreicher claims of the patriotic fetes of the early republic, “celebrations were never merely tools used by political factions to gain followers: they were actual enactments of ideological alternatives” (Fetes 19). The artisan parade accompanying Lafayette on his return to Manhattan and the mechanics library that the General helped construct, then, constituted more than mere attempts by subordinate workers to conform to the expectations of capitalist society; such acts were the means by which laborers asserted their equal role in determining the economic and political destiny of the nation. Taking part in patriotic ceremonies, Sean Wilentz claims, “announced the artisans’ determination to be part of the body politic—no longer ‘meer mechanicks,’ …but proud craftsmen, appearing for all to see on important civic occasions, marching in orderly formation…with all the regalia and tools of their crafts” (Chants 90). These displays were accompanied by political pressure, and artisans succeeded in shaping the legislative agenda to meet their demands for the elimination of property requirements for voting, the establishment of the ten hour workday, and the elimination of institutions—including a national bank—that unequally promoted the interests of the few over the many. As agents within the body politic, artisans championed their own interest and selected their own political champions, as when, to the consternation of conservative elites, they helped usher Andrew Jackson into the White House.
This study, then, considers the forms of republicanism that emerged during a period that saw the nation grapple with an eruption of democratic reform. It also considers how competing appropriations of republicanism brought the nation to the verge of civil war. Between the 1830s and 1850s activists employed Revolutionary history, iconography, and ideals to promote republicanism. Some argued for the further democratization of political authority, while others castigated false republicans—particularly slaveholders—who perverted the nation’s institutions to maintain their hold on power. The process seeks to uncover the process by which individuals and political parties invested such terms as “republican” with multiple, concrete, and increasingly divisive meanings reveals that during the antebellum period consensus did not reign but rather “the versions of American republicanism multiplied” (Chants 61).

This dissertation examines texts composed between 1835 and 1856 that appropriate Revolutionary figures, iconography, or ideals explicitly to promote radical reform. The three chapters that comprise Part One address Revolutionary narratives that predominantly respond to class stratification and efforts to reform labor practices. Though these discourses often intersect with discourses of race, I have dedicated Part Two to a more detailed discussion of how abolitionists used the disparity between the promised republicanism of the Revolution and the oppressive practices of society to promote their cause.

The first chapter examines Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s The Linwoods; or, Sixty Years Since (1835) in light of contemporaneous controversies regarding class and the social costs of the nation’s economic expansion. Sedgwick makes for an interesting biographical study, as extended family ties link her to both the Federalist establishment of the early
republic as well as the most radical factions of the Jacksonian Democratic Party. Critics who have focused on Sedgwick’s treatment of class and gender in her fiction have tended to emphasize their conservative qualities, particularly her reliance upon the ideology of republican motherhood. Less attention has been devoted to those aspects of her work that garnered for her explicit praise from such progressive figures as William Leggett, the radical Jacksonian editor and New York politico, and Margaret Fuller. These progressive voices suggest the range of Sedgwick’s audience, who could draw from her fiction a multitude of political meanings. Though Sedgwick employs conventional frameworks for discussing differences of class, gender, and race, the dissonance within her texts and the range of critical responses to those texts suggest that these frameworks were not necessarily wedded to particular ideologies.

In Chapter Two, I focus primarily on George Lippard’s Washington and His Generals (1847), a collection of romantic tales of the Revolutionary period. Of the texts addressed in this study, Lippard’s is the most revisionist and jingoistic, but arguably the most complex in its cultural work. Lippard’s sensationalist fiction is superficially savage and hubristic; he relishes descriptions of battlefield gore and loudly trumpets the cause of Manifest Destiny. As an advocate of labor reform, Lippard believed that annexing Mexican territory would open a space for a workers’ utopia organized in accordance with principles of cooperation that he gleaned in his reading of European socialists. Indeed, Lippard’s support for territorial expansion is inextricable from his millenialist hopes for socialist revolution in Europe and domestic reform to protect the dignity of labor. By reading Lippard’s Revolutionary fictions in connection with his efforts to preserve a radical legacy of the Revolution—he was arguably the most influential American defender of Thomas Paine—and to enact reform
through such organization as the National Industrial Congress and his own Brotherhood of the Union, we can recover the texts’ utility for both progressive and tragically oppressive ends.

The third chapter addresses Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter* (1855) and its re-imagination of the Revolution in light of England’s and the United States’ continued commitment to industrialism and the market. Like Sedgwick’s and Lippard’s Revolutionary fictions, Melville’s text engages—though somewhat more retrospectively and cynically—class and labor issues, particularly veterans’ pension reform. Melville locates in the ambiguity of the Revolution—embodied in such figures as John Paul Jones and Benjamin Franklin—forerunners of later imperialist and exploitative practices. In sharp contrast to Lippard’s utopian vision, Melville postulates an industrial dystopia and destruction emerging from British and American competition. Melville’s vision of the Revolution does not constitute a disavowal of that history as such, but instead foregrounds its problematic aspects; his narrative does not preclude heroic action, but rather questions the ends to which it has been directed.

Part Two opens with a consideration of Frederick Douglass’s novella “The Heroic Slave” (1853), in which Douglass envisions a successful slave revolt led by the suggestively named hero, Madison Washington. Douglass’s novella corresponds to a tradition, represented by William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855), that represented African Americans’ willingness to fight for the ideals of liberty and freedom as evidence for their deserving citizenship. Douglass’s frequent, though occasionally ironic, invocations of Revolutionary history, coupled with his representation of
The final chapter considers Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* (1856), which, like the texts discussed in the previous chapter, builds a case for African American citizenship by representing the slave’s claims to natural rights, including the right to revolution. Unlike Douglass, Stowe is unable to represent a successful rebellion by the slaves. This difference is often considered a failure of imagination on Stowe’s part; Stowe argues, however, that the republican ideals of the Revolution have been perverted by the South, whose institutions have sought to achieve the slave’s subjection rather than secure its citizens’ freedom. Consequently, Stowe contends, Southern society as a whole needs to be reformed before the slave or the citizen can enjoy the fruits of the Revolution.

Historicizing Revolutionary romances enables readers to re-open an archive of texts that, solely due to its content, has garnered little critical attention since the bicentennial. That these texts were last studied seriously during a time of celebration, as well as growing diplomatic and military influence by the United States, has served to set these texts in opposition to the literary and cultural values that have driven the explosion of the canon. In the process, we have failed to recover one of the many points of intersection between political and print culture during the antebellum period. Situating Revolutionary romances amidst popular political movements and the contestations over the definitions of republicanism enables readers to reclaim the radical resonance of such texts and to avoid the pitfalls of ahistorical demands for a text’s complete opposition to cultural hegemony. Most centrally, the project may help to illuminate an important tradition of patriotic yet radical memory. Those who denounce cultural myths as conservative and oppressive surrender the
opportunity to share in shaping those myths. Self-conscious and humble engagement with narratives of the nation’s destiny is necessary to prevent those narratives from being harnessed toward further acts of cultural hubris, from conceiving of a mythic America that “has gone from liberating Boston, to liberating Baghdad…from [the] snows of Valley Forge, to the sandstorms of central Iraq.…” (“VP Remarks”). After all, a similar appeal—by a popular romancer—was used to sell a public on war with Mexico.
Whitman composed these columns as a freelancer during 1861 and 1862 (Reynolds, Whitman, 407).

For a thorough treatment of the burden felt by the sons of the Founders, see George Forgie, Patricide in the House Divided: a Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age. According to Forgie, “As the physical ties to the beginning grew weaker, the psychological ties to the same period grew stronger, until some people began to fear that the danger facing the Republic was not that these cords would snap, but that they would be used by the dead to strangle the living” (53).

See Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence.

See Shirley Samuels, Romances of the Republic; Russ Castronovo, Fathering the Nation.

As scholars including Wilentz and Christopher Looby have argued, the extent of political contestation during the early national and antebellum periods has been obscured in part by Americans’ “singular political language”—the practice, nearly universal at that time, of expressing one’s political commitments in terms of “liberty” and republicanism (Chants 61). Looby has criticized the “literature on the Revolution’s ideological origins” for its “commit[ment] to the dubious task of recovering the ‘true’ definitions of such words as ‘virtue’ and ‘liberty,’ rather than tracing the complex process of their semantic transvaluation” (40).
“I am ‘one of the survivors who fought, bled, and died on Bunker Hill,’” Catharine Maria Sedgwick wrote her brother Charles on June 17, 1825, the fiftieth anniversary of the first major battle of the American Revolution (Letters 176). Earlier in the day, she had joined the enormous crowd assembled upon the heights outside of Charlestown, to witness the laying of the cornerstone of the new Bunker Hill monument. Sedgwick attended as the guest of then-congressman Daniel Webster, who delivered the keynote oration. Traveling in Webster’s party, Sedgwick wrote her brother Charles later that day, assured that she would be “among the hearers—the select few” (175). Such a privileged position likewise insured that she would catch sight of the Marquis de Lafayette, as well as the band of veterans that rounded out the ranks of honored guests.

The fifty years passed since the battle at Bunker Hill had exacted a toll on the revolutionaries. As Webster intoned from the foot of the hill, “Those are daily dropping from among us who established our liberty and our government” (132). Those veterans who did live to see the jubilee anniversaries were shadows of their former selves; as Sedgwick described them, the veterans comprised a band of “old weather-beaten survivors, with their palsied limbs and nerveless arms, once strong and raised in their might for us….” (Letters 176). “Palsied” and “nerveless” were certainly not terms that Americans associated with
their nation’s heroes, nor were they terms in which proud republicans envisioned the leaders of their country.

The passing of the Revolutionary generation presented crises of leadership and memory for their sons and daughters, those whom George Forgie dubs the “post-heroic generation.” Webster gave voice to what Forgie deems a generational inferiority complex when he lamented, “We can win no laurels in a war of independence. Earlier and worthier have garnered them all. Nor are there places for us by the side of Solon, and Alfred, and other founders of states. Our fathers have filled them” (132). In a culture suffused with the memory of the Revolutionary fathers, the subsequent generation, both blessed and cursed by “a debt of gratitude that could never be paid off,” struggled to ensure that their Revolutionary inheritance “was…enjoyed, but not squandered” (Forgie 9).

The jubilee celebrations of the early battles for independence marked a transitional moment in Americans’ engagement with Revolutionary history. Gatherings like those at Bunker Hill offered an increasingly rare opportunity to experience the Revolutionary legacy firsthand. Though flustered by the throng, Sedgwick mused, “When I think…of the cloud of witnesses… of the good Lafayette looking with the benignity of a blessed spirit upon the countless multitude; of the old man’s prayer; of the union of voices pouring out their praise—when I think of all these things, I am grateful that I was permitted to see and hear” (Letters 176). Such feelings were echoed innumerably during Lafayette’s return to America, which coincided with the anniversary celebrations. Between August 1824 and September 1825, Lafayette and his companions trekked north into New England and as far south as Savannah. Pilgrims young and old descended on the sites of legendary battles—Trenton,
Yorktown, Camden—and flocked to burgeoning settlements in the West—Montgomery, St. Louis, Nashville—to pay their respects and give thanks to the graying General.¹

As Lafayette and company traversed the twenty-four states of the Union, moving far beyond the boundaries of the original thirteen colonies, they made use of new transportation systems, particularly the recently-completed Erie Canal, which vastly cut transit times between the frontier settlements in Ohio and the markets of Manhattan. The opening of the canal secured New York’s ascension as a mercantile capital; moreover, it and similar improvement projects further solidified the nation’s commitment to the capitalist market. The market’s influence on society—producing explosive growth but also deepened inequality and economic depression—gave rise to some of the most pressing challenges of leadership during the antebellum period.

Though its later status as a model of schoolboy declamation partly obscured its political content, Webster’s Bunker Hill oration was very much a partisan declaration. Webster, like many members of the Whig party, responded to the challenges of his generation by waving the banner of “improvement.” “Our proper business is improvement,” Webster proclaimed at the Bunker Hill anniversary; “Let our age be the age of improvement” (132). In terms of policy, “improvement” meant not only setting in place a federal program for internal improvements—for building canals, turnpikes, and the like—but also entailed championing a national bank and a high protective tariff as a means of fostering domestic production. “Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, promote all its great interests, and see whether we also, in our day and generation, may not perform something worthy to be remembered,” Webster extolled the crowd (132).
The Whigs’ program for economic development was rooted in a moral framework that also shaped their memory and treatment of the Revolution. For Webster, the tale of the Revolution was one marked by the character and self-control of the colonists—qualities that were also necessary to avoid debt and the various pitfalls of the market (Wilentz Rise 491). Webster’s Bunker Hill oration laid out a providential history of the United States highlighting “how fortunate was our own condition, and how admirably the character of our people was calculated for setting the great example of popular governments” (128-29).

Webster contended that the Revolution succeeded precisely because “The character of our countrymen…was sober, moral, and religious….” (129). Making extensive use of republican themes, Webster praised the incorruptibility of the revolutionaries: “The possession of power did not turn the heads of the American people, for they had long been in the habit of exercising a great degree of self control” (129).

Printed remembrances of the war in Whig-controlled publications perpetuated these beliefs. In January 1825, several months before Lafayette’s appearance at Bunker Hill, the Boston magazine The North American Review published a biographical sketch of Lafayette. Sedgwick read and was moved by this piece, as she explains in a letter to one of her chief correspondents, her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick:

I spent last evening at Robert’s, and we read with delight the memoir of Lafayette in the last North American. There is something sublime in the consistency of this great man in all the extremes of fortune—steadfast amidst the temptations of unequaled prosperity and (oh, shame to his persecutors!) unparalleled adversity; an enthusiasm governed by reason and directed by benevolence. What a delightful example to our species, and still shining in its brightness where every eye may behold it. (Letters 170)

Sedgwick’s emphasis on Lafayette’s “consistency,” “reason,” and “benevolence” echo the values trumpeted by Webster; moreover, her letter reproduces the Whig’s contention that
such virtues were necessary as a check upon “enthusiasm,” a term traditionally used to refer to overzealous and misguided religious belief. The dangers of enthusiasm were clearly evident, from this viewpoint, in the immorality of the French Revolution. Whereas in America, Webster proclaimed, the “rotation” of the “great wheel of liberty” was “guarded, regular, and safe...[transferred] to the other continent...it received an irregular and violent impulse...till at length...it took fire from the rapidity of its own motion, and blazed onward, spreading conflagration and terror around” (128).

In attempting to differentiate the American founders from the unruly revolutionaries in France, Whigs, like the Federalists before them, formulated an idealized vision of Revolutionary America as a classless society: “We had no domestic throne to overturn, no privileged orders to cast down, no violent changes of property to encounter,” Webster claimed (129). “In the American Revolution, no man sought or wished for more than to defend and enjoy his own. None hoped for plunder or for spoil....” (129). Such assertions laid the groundwork for the argument that Americans should be governed by a “natural aristocracy,” a class whose qualifications for rule were based in their “natural” gifts of intelligence and virtue rather than in “artificial” social distinctions.

Democrats who decried class-based inequalities in the nation’s economic and electoral systems were often branded dangerous enthusiasts akin to the French revolutionaries. As a youth, Catharine Sedgwick was prone to this bias: “I entered fully, and with the faith and ignorance of childhood, into the prejudices of the time. I thought every Democrat was grasping, dishonest, and vulgar, and would have in good faith adopted the creed of a staunch old parson, who, in a Fast-day sermon, said, ‘I don’t say that every horse-thief is a Democrat, but I do say that every Democrat is a horse-thief!’” (Power 81). Vestiges
of this prejudice—and echoes of the parson’s insult—manifested themselves in Sedgwick’s fiction, particularly an 1831 tale, “A Story of Shays’ War.” The historical event that serves as the setting for this piece had personal significance for Sedgwick, whose father played a key role in putting down the rebellion. A brief episode in the story illustrates the lingering cultural belief—one to which Sedgwick, to some extent, still subscribed—that distinctions between classes were part of the natural order. When one of the rebels, the peddler Peter Parker, attempts to steal a horse, he encounters opposition not only from the horse’s proud owner but also from the horse itself. Lora, the horse’s owner, “knew Peter, an itinerant vendor of brooms, wooden bowls, primers and notions,” Sedgwick writes, “and that he should presume to mount the patrician palfrey was incredible to [her]” (305). Meanwhile, the horse, Jenny Gray, “quietly permitted Peter to perform the office of groom, which fitted him, as she seemed instinctively to know; but when he attempted to mount her, she became restive, and Peter patted and coaxed her in vain” (306). The animal’s dutiful response to Lora’s cries to “‘Throw him, Jenny, throw him!’” lands the hapless thief sprawled on the ground and suggests that both animals and people should know their proper place (306).

As Sedgwick explained in her autobiography, she inherited her youthful prejudice against Democrats from her father, a prominent Federalist. Following his tenure as an aide during the Revolution, Theodore Sedgwick served as a congressman and as Speaker of the House of Representatives before claiming a seat on the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Sedgwick explained that she and her siblings “had so strong a sympathy with [their father] that there was no part of his life which we did not partake.…” (Power 63). Looking back to the period of Jefferson’s victory over Adams, she confesses, “I remember well looking upon a Democrat as an enemy to his country, and at the party as sure, if it prevailed, to work its
destruction….”(63). Sedgwick—who deemed her own unsystematic education a deficiency—partly forgave her father his elitism, convinced that it was a product of training: “[the Federalists’] misfortune, and perhaps the inevitable consequence of having been educated loyal subjects of a monarchical government, was a thorough distrust of ‘the people’” (64). That distrust became more difficult to defend as the Democratic ascendancy continued. Yet Sedgwick could offer a more palatable defense of her father’s party by framing that defense in terms of republican sacrifice. Dwelling on her childhood, she recalled, “I received the impression then (and, looking back with a riper judgment, I feel assured of its correctness) that the Federal party loved their country and were devoted to it, as virtuous parents are to their children” (63-64). Theodore Sedgwick’s role as a patriarch made his service all the more significant in his daughter’s eyes: “My father felt it was his duty to remain in public life at every private sacrifice—at the expense of his domestic happiness, his home-love, which was his ruling passion” (64-65). By rooting her father’s “ruling passion” in domestic virtue, Sedgwick sought to defend his capability, and public responsibility, to play a role in the country’s governance. Sentimentalizing the function of government as Sedgwick does above lends a note of nostalgia to her reminiscences. In the broader political culture, Forgie argues, that practice of sentimentalization also served the purpose of counter-balancing progressive forces in society: “Behind this language rested the conservative assumption, sometimes articulated but more often not, that the survival of the Union depended on offsetting the centrifugal and atomistic tendencies of an amorphous and rapidly expanding democracy by the cohesive force of emotion” (4).

Yet Sedgwick’s account of the Shays rebellion also betrays sympathy for the plight of the impoverished farmers. The Shays rebels protested the ruthless fashion in which the
lending class persisted in collecting debts—even when widespread financial difficulties made their repayment impossible. Particularly vexing for Sedgwick is the thought that among the victims of the rebellion—those beset first by hard times, and then by unsympathetic creditors—were those who had proven their mettle by aiding the American Revolutionary cause. In exploring this possibility, Sedgwick comes to the surprising conclusion that the rebels may well have been justified in their resistance—a reading of Shays Rebellion that was far from accepted at the time.

The protagonist of the story, Harry Lee, joins the rebellion in part because he feels it is the best way to honor his father, a soldier killed during the Revolution. Upon his death, the elder Lee has no patrimony to pass on to his son other than a farm, “heavily encumbered with debts…[and] the glorious memory of his devotion to his country” (292). When it appears that foreclosure on the farm is inevitable, Harry’s mother resignedly states, “‘the will of the Lord be done.’” Harry retorts:

“But is it the will of the Lord, mother? Is it his will that one man should have his table spread with all the dainties in the land, while another man starves? That the children of those who sacrificed their property and their lives for the independence of their country, should be reduced to slavish dependence on hard hearted creditors? Did not my father fight for his home; was it not his watchword through seven years of hardship, in battle and in death; and are we to be driven from it without resistance?” (294)

Harry’s indignation replicates several Democratic arguments against “natural aristocracy.” Rural Anti-Federalists, Sean Wilentz explains, remained “[unconvinced] that any group of uniquely virtuous natural leaders existed,” and considered “the Federalists’ claims to disinterested patriotism as camouflage for their pursuit of wealth and domination” (Rise 36). Federalist elitism led Democrats to reconsider the relationship between the government and the people. “Experience,” Charles Sellers writes, “was imparting a toughened democratic realism to Jefferson’s conception of republicanism” (114). Jefferson and his party “began to
measure republicanism itself by a realistic democratic standard: ‘the control of the people over the organs of their government’” (114).

As a means of subverting the self-serving Federalists, anti-Federalists called for an expansion of the suffrage, and sought a greater participation of middling classes in government—a campaign that again gained steam with Andrew Jackson’s rise to prominence. The Democratic project of expanding access to government, Wilentz concludes, did not entail “simply challenging natural aristocracy’s claims to disinterestedness”; rather, Democrats “were asserting their own interests” (Rise 36). As a counter to the Federalist ideal of “natural aristocracy,” Democrats seized upon Jefferson’s formulation of the yeoman republic, which postulated that the productive classes—not the wealthy merchants and lawyers who populated the supposedly democratic assemblies—were best suited to serve as the people’s representatives in government. These formulations reveal the true injustice done to the Shays rebels: though Harry’s husbandry and his father’s sacrifice in the Revolution should establish the Lee family as the rightful stewards of the land—and, ostensibly, as proper leaders of the republic—Harry has instead been degraded to a “slavish” dependency.

Rhetorically, Harry’s invocation of slavery echoes not only colonial denunciations of British oppression from the Revolutionary era, but also the increasingly loud calls for labor reform issuing from American cities during the early nineteenth century. White wage laborers, determined to reveal the wrongdoing of their employers and the ugly underside of the “improvement” scheme—and either unaware of, or unwilling to address, the problematic racial implications of their message—compared their condition to that of chattel slaves. Such comparisons proliferated in the wake of the Panic of 1819, which, Wilentz asserts,
“cracked open huge questions as to who was to be the chief beneficiary of the new business order—and about its implications for political democracy” (Rise 216).

Elite control over mechanisms of trade and institutions such as the national bank, Democrats argued, served to stand up an aristocracy while also plunging the laboring classes into debt. Moreover, the expansion of trade, coupled with the advent of industrial production, gave rise to a debased conception of labor. The opening of canals and growth of trade centers, especially New York, served to “galvanize market revolution by dramatically extending the division of labor in each port/hinterland region” (Sellers 43). Communities along these major transportation thoroughfares became more specialized in their production, most labor being devoted to filling the agricultural needs of the urban centers or processing raw materials en route. As Harry Watson reminds us, “A similar process led Henry David Thoreau’s neighbors in Concord, Massachusetts, to throw themselves into the production of milk and vegetables for the nearby Boston market, much to that philosopher’s disgust’ (28).

In Stockbridge, in western Massachusetts, Sedgwick spied similar changes. Generally, befitting her friendship with Webster, she took a positive view of improvement. While composing her autobiography in August 1854, Catharine Sedgwick expressed her wish to “note some changes in the condition of our village since I was young” (Power 94). “I remember the making of the turnpike through Stockbridge,” she mused (94). The turnpike launched “a great era…for it enabled us to have a stagecoach three days in the week from Boston to Albany, and three from Albany to Boston. In due time came the daily coach, arriving, after driving the greater part of two nights, the middle of the second day from Boston” (94). The coach, of course, was soon surpassed by the railroad, and Catharine proudly claimed that her brother, Theodore, had been the first to advocate having the rail line
pass through Stockbridge. “Now,” she wrote, “at 3 P.M., we read the paper issued the same morning in New York” (95).

Yet Sedgwick also saw the adverse effects of industrialization taking hold. At the opening of “A Story of Shays’ War,” she paints an idyllic portrait of the Berkshire region’s natural beauty, using fluid and energetic language to describe a waterfall that “issues victoriously from its dark and rocky defile to thread its mazes through the valley of Barrington” (281). That image, however, is quickly discarded as a thing of the past: “As we have described it, it was, but is no longer” (281). Rather, the ravages of industry have indelibly marked the landscape and its inhabitants:

A mill dam is built across the pretty irregular fall; a turnpike company, chartered spoilers of romantic grace, have laid out a broad road on the margin of the stream which time has worn from the mountain; and the green slopes and still meadows…are now covered with factories and mills, and dotted with little white cages in which platoons of factory girls are fed, three times per day. (282)

Though internal improvements could help satisfy Sedgwick’s hunger for news, they could also carry with them the impersonal forces of the market, thereby bringing about the exploitation and emotional starvation of those less fortunate.

Despite her affluent upbringing in New England, Sedgwick was not ignorant of the changes seizing the American city, and New York in particular. Sedgwick’s *Clarence; or, A Tale of Our Own Times* (1830), an early city novel, opens with a theatrical procession of characters down “*Broadway*, the thronged thoroughfare through which the full tide of human existence pours, the pride of the metropolis of our western world….” (7). Sedgwick’s vision of Manhattan is one dominated by commerce: “The morning opens,” Sedgwick writes, as if parting a curtain, “with servants sweeping the pavements---the pale seamstress hastening to her daily toil…the cry of the brisk milkman---the jolly baker and the sonorous sweep---” (8).
Following the rush of the “the business hour”—when amidst the flood of foot traffic one may spy “the merchant, full of projects, hopes, and fears, hastening to his counting house—the clerk to his desk—the lawyer to the courts—the children to their schools, and country ladies to their shopping”—“then come forth the gay and idle, and Broadway presents a scene as bustling, as varied, and as brilliant, as an oriental fair” (8-9).

As we have already seen, Sedgwick in part had access to New York society through the newspapers. Additionally, New York became home for members of the Sedgwick family—and, for long stretches, for Catharine herself. She divided the year between Stockbridge and Manhattan, wintering in New York and making her home with her siblings and their families. Sedgwick’s experience of city life was not confined to the salons or fashionable streets of affluent society; she also lent her support to reform movements that tackled the problems of the lower classes. Democrats within what Edward Widmer refers to as the “cultural region” comprised of “the rough triangle between New York, Albany, and Stockbridge” found common cause in reform efforts that “tended to cluster around class issues and democratic precepts....” (62). Through her participation in the prison reform movement in New York, for instance, Sedgwick befriended John L. O’Sullivan, the publisher of the influential United States Magazine and Democratic Review, as well as a prominent figure in the northeastern arm of the Democratic Party. In 1837, O’Sullivan solicited Sedgwick’s contributions for the Democratic Review, which would become not only a powerful party organ, but also a destination for important works by the likes of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Sedgwick’s connections to the New York Democracy also included Gansevoort Melville, who sought out Sedgwick’s acquaintance during his rise as a party spokesman (Avallone 120).
Another important influence upon the Sedgwicks—as well as O’Sullivan, Walt Whitman, and numerous figures later associated with radical causes in America—was the New York newspaper editor William Leggett. Alongside William Cullen Bryant, Leggett edited the New York Evening Post, which, as Sedgwick confessed in a letter to Bryant, she read as “a sort of daily intercourse” with Bryant (Letters 406). The Sedgwicks’ connections to those at the helm of the paper were sufficiently strong and public that the New York Herald would make reference to “the Evening Post and Sedgwick clique of the city” (qtd. in Avallone 116). Leggett himself represented the interests of labor radicals, who developed “an urban variation of the Jeffersonian social theme of the virtuous husbandman…one that fused craft pride and resentment of deference and fear of dependence into a republican celebration of the trades” (Chants 94). The division of labor that accompanied trade expansion had numerous adverse effects on urban workers, serving to splinter the interests between masters and journeymen laborers. Many New York Democrats became more militant in their advocacy of workers’ rights and their condemnation of the abuses of those who controlled the means of production. Leggett used his columns in the Evening Post—and, later, in his own weekly, The Plaindealer—to issue a staunch defense of free trade and universal suffrage, as well as to voice strong opposition to the tariff, the “monopoly system” of incorporated banks, and attempts to bar immigrants from the polls. Furthermore, Leggett became an early supporter of organized labor, proclaiming the power of “the great instrument of the rights of the poor—associated effort” (2:126).

Leggett’s influence was not confined to the realm of rhetoric, but rather proved the impetus for the formation of an opposition political party. The Equal Rights Party, a group of workingmen and newspaper politicos allied to Leggett, held its inaugural meeting in a
darkened Tammany Hall on October 29th, 1835 (Byrdsall 27). Though the lights had been turned out to discourage their meeting, the Equal Rights men flooded the Hall with light from candles lit by loco-foco matches, thereafter securing for the party the name Locofoco (27).

Among the resolutions adopted at the initial meetings of the party were those against the National Bank and all state banks, whose charters, they believed, infringed on equal rights and encouraged speculation (27). Furthermore, they declared themselves anti-monopoly and against “all distinctions but those of merit,” and advocated election reforms that would allow for individual voters to more directly influence the results and ensure politicians’ accountability to the public (27). Thus, the party threw their support behind a platform advocating direct election of President and Vice President, limiting the president to one term in office, and generally shortening terms of office for all elected positions (27). Though the Locofoco continued as an organized party for only a short time, its influence endured as members helped to steer politics within New York and to establish organizations such as the National Industrial Congress. In time, the term “Locofoco” became a sort of catch-all phrase used—often by Whig antagonists—to refer to the entirety of the northern Democracy. As Walt Whitman would later write, “[Leggett’s] ideas—once derided, but now widely worshipped—form the best elements of the Democratic creed, and of the Democratic Party” (qtd. in Earle 73).

Sedgwick’s familiarity with the Evening Post, along with her reform work, suggest that she would have been quite familiar with the sentiments of radical New York Democrats. Family connections further support this link. Following Leggett’s death in 1839, Theodore Sedgwick III—Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s nephew, friend to the Democratic Review, and a leading figure among young New York Democrats—edited a two volume edition of the
editor’s political writings. Furthermore, it is important to note that not only did Sedgwick read Leggett (in the pages of the Post), but that Leggett read Sedgwick. In the inaugural issue of The Plaindealer, Leggett announced that his paper “will be thoroughly democratick. It will be democratick not merely to the extent of the political maxim, that the majority have the right to govern: but to the extent of the moral maxim, that it is the duty of the majority so to govern as to preserve inviolate the equal rights of all” (“Political Plaindealer” 1). To that end, Leggett declared war upon the banking system and all government-supported systems of unequal privilege. “The days of the charter-mongers are numbered,” he threatened. “The era of equal privileges is at hand” (1). In the very same issue, Leggett devoted the literary portion of the paper (dubbed “The Literary Plaindealer”) to a review of Sedgwick’s The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man (1836). The review opens as follows: “Miss Sedgwick (it gives us pleasure to place her name the first word of the first article in this department of our paper) has given another proof, in the excellent little volume before us, of those kindly feelings and sympathies which seem to prompt her in all she writes. Her productions are always attempered [sic] by a fine philosophy” (5). Sedgwick’s works, the review continues, “are the fruits of a mind which observes closely and reasons soundly, and which is governed by a high humanity—by a comprehensive philanthropy, that estimates its success rather from the good it does than the applause it wins” (5). In conclusion, the reviewer declares Sedgwick “the champion of the respectability of the virtuous poor, and teaches that honesty in rags is a thousand times more worthy of consideration, than wealth throned on his money-bags, and fenced around with exclusive immunities” (5).

In writing a Revolutionary romance, Sedgwick explains, she sought to “exhibit the feeling of the times” and “by means of this impression to deepen [readers’] gratitude to their
patriot-fathers; a sentiment that will tend to increase their fidelity to the free institutions transmitted to them” (Linwoods 5). It is easy to read this statement, particularly Sedgwick’s invocation of her readers’ “fidelity,” as one that values aesthetics or conservative replication above political innovation. Yet, it is essential to keep in mind that the key concepts through which Americans understood Revolutionary history and their own government—terms such as “liberty” and “democracy,” as well as “natural aristocracy” and “republican motherhood”—were being continuously redefined. That Leggett himself praised Sedgwick’s fiction for its “American” and “democratick” features suggests both the manner in which such terms became imbued with new meanings, as well as the possibility that Sedgwick’s fiction could have found political resonance with the audiences of “radical” journalism (“Literary Plaindealer” 5). Indeed, a close reading of The Linwoods within the context of radical Democratic discourse and activism reveals that readers could derive from Sedgwick’s text an assertion of democratic principles and a bold call for reform. Sedgwick’s romance engages with the dominant political disputes of the time, particularly debates over class stratification and the rights of workers.³

The Linwoods tells the story of the Linwood family, a respectable clan from New York City that becomes divided against itself as tensions mount between the colonies and mother country. The family patriarch remains a loyalist, while the son, Herbert—and, eventually, Herbert’s sister, Isabella, the protagonist of the tale—pledge allegiance to the rebels. As with many of the Revolutionary romances of the period, the narrative concludes with a match, as Isabella finds her equal in the brave yeoman, Elliot Lee. The relationship between Elliot and Isabella reveals the central political constructs employed in the novel.
The first of these constructs is republican motherhood. In the early republic, women mainly laid claim to political agency by subscribing to this ideology, under which, Linda Kerber asserts, “If women were no longer prepolitical, they certainly were not fully political” (12). According to this ideological construct, women’s political contributions to the nation consisted mainly in producing and properly rearing sons who would then perpetuate the republican government of the nation. Thus, though republican motherhood was often spoken of as a “fourth branch of government,” women exerted political influence only indirectly, through their children, rather than through any direct device (200).

In her introduction to a recent anthology of Sedgwick criticism, Mary Kelley suggests that Sedgwick can best be read as “an author who, in committing herself and her fiction to the reform and regeneration of society, bases her authority on the role articulated by advocates of Republican Motherhood” (xiii). Indeed, Sedgwick’s *The Linwoods* features a number of characters shaped by the ideology of republican motherhood. The most explicit illustration of this concept—and most nearly comical in its patriotic stridency—comes at the end of the text when the youngest member of the Linwood family greets the victorious Continental Army parading down Broadway with his first words: a loud “‘Huzza!’” (359). The babe’s grandfather, a recovering Tory, half-derisively claims that the child was “‘born under Washington’s flag, and sucks in independence and republicanism with his mother’s milk, the little rascal’” (355). Partly through the sacrifice and republican spirit of his mother, the former Lady Anne, who surrenders her title so that she “‘will have no distinction but that which suits the country of my adoption—that which I may derive from being a good wife and mother—the true *American order of merit,*’” the boy can claim as his inheritance the opportunity to contribute to America’s destiny (353).
As Shirley Samuels has argued, “romances of the republic” from the early national period “present[ed] women and the family paradoxically as at once embodiments and abstractions of national values” (14). Sedgwick clearly envisions the nation through the lens of the family, and vice versa, as is evident by Martha Washington’s standing in for Isabella and Eliot’s parents at their wedding (Linwoods 348). Sedgwick, in her authorial asides, only timidly gestures toward ways in which women’s place in society could move beyond a symbolic role. In particular, Sedgwick advocates reform in women’s education, specifically the introduction of historical and political subjects into their course of study. She does not, however, indicate how those changes would affect women’s standing in society. “There are those,” she writes, “who deem political subjects beyond the sphere of a woman’s, certainly of a young woman’s mind.”

But if our young ladies were to give a portion of the time and interest they spend on dress, gossip, and light-reading, to the comprehension of the constitution of their country, and its political institutions, would they be less interesting companions, less qualified mothers, or less amiable women? “But there are dangers in a woman adventuring beyond her customary path.” There are, and better the chances of shipwreck on a voyage of high purpose, than expend life in paddling hither and thither on a shallow stream, to no purpose at all. (344-45)

As this passage suggests, an education in politics and history could spark the intellect of young women, but that spark would likely only make them better suited for the roles they already occupied: “amiable” companions and mothers. Thus we are led to consider the scene in which Eliot and Isabella declare their love for each other in a rather conservative light. Isabella’s political maturation, the key development in the novel, does not go unnoticed by Eliot: “[I]n this short period,” he tells her,

“I have seen your mind casting off the shackles of early prejudices, resisting the authority of opinion, self-rectified, and forming its independent judgments on those great interests in which the honour and prosperity of your country are involved. I have gloried in seeing you
willing to sacrifice the pride, the exclusiveness, and all the little idol vanities of accidental distinctions, to the popular and generous side.” (322)

Though Eliot’s praise confirms Isabella in her adoption of egalitarian principles, it also commits her to a social role predicated on self-sacrifice. Isabella opens the door for a more liberated formulation of women’s position when she proposes, “‘I think you like me for, what most men like not at all—my love of freedom and independence of control’”; Eliot’s response, however, clearly situates women’s place as being confined to a domestic setting: “‘I do homage to your genius, talent and accomplishment, but I love your gracious, domestic, home-felt virtues’” (322-23).

Sedgwick provides a more complex view of women’s agency, however, when a group of women combine to break Herbert out of prison. The key characters in this collective are Lizzy Bengin, a shopkeeper, and Rose, a servant and former slave, who push against the limitations of women’s political identity as configured by the ideology of “republican motherhood.”

Though Mrs. Bengin only makes her appearance toward the end of the novel, she plays an important role in the story, first by offering an example of a woman in a commercial rather than a domestic setting, then by guiding Herbert’s escape across the river to New Jersey. Mrs. Bengin’s store serves in one respect to offer an alternate female space free from male control; the only controlling masculine presence in the shop is that of the parrot Sylvy, who “seemed to preside over the destinies of the shop, and did in fact lure many a young urchin into it” (315). During the escape episode in which Bengin plays the pilot, Sedgwick attributes to Lizzy masculine knowledge and strength: she is a capable captain who knows “‘every turn of the current’”; furthermore, she is endowed with an imposing (if not overtly masculine) physical form, with “short muscular arms bared, and every nerve of body and
mind strained” (336). Sedgwick explicitly equates such attributes with masculinity, referring to the “masculine spirit and skill that now did her such good service” (337). That “spirit and skill” are the result of her father’s decision to raise his only child as if she were the son he had always wanted. In some ways, then, Lizzy seems a product of the educational system Sedgwick advocates in her authorial asides, thus lending a more radical edge to what seems an otherwise conservative political system.

The degree to which Sedgwick plays with sexual roles and appearances during the pivotal moments of the novel is striking. Some of the most suspenseful scenes in the novel include descriptions of male characters as (at least superficially) emasculated. For instance, the women enable Herbert’s escape from the jail by providing him with a female disguise—and that of an African-American female, to boot (327). Despite displaying such apparently masculine characteristics as a strong arm and an “inspiring voice” while being chased by the British, Lizzy Bengin reverts back to a submissive female form when the success of their escape seems in doubt: “Dame Bengin’s sturdy spirit had yielded to her woman’s nature, and she had dropped her oars, and given the common signals of her sex’s weakness in streaming tears and wringing hands” (337-38). This display of female weakness has a similarly adverse affect on Herbert, who continues to row furiously even after Lizzy has given up, but who is compelled in the end to abandon his hope of escape at the urging of the women and upon seeing his beloved Lady Anne faint. It seems at moments like this that Sedgwick places limits on the degree to which women can actuate their own freedom separate from the aid of men.

Earlier in the escape scene, however, Sedgwick offers a more subversive view of female agency by tying female strength to domestic duties, but enabling the exercise of those
domestic strengths outside of the home. Rose’s power over Cunningham, one of the British jailers, is reinforced through explicitly domestic duties, as her strength seems to reside primarily in her knitting and her ability to whip up a poison drink, which she refers to as “porridge,” in the “coffee-bowl” of medicine (329). Even as Rose threatens Cunningham’s life, her relation to him is almost maternal in the way she places the bowl to his lips, feeds him as if he were a baby, and even tells him that “‘You’re but a baby in my hands’” (329). She then binds Cunningham with garters that she’s knitted, and which, she tells him, could “‘bear the weight of twenty such slim pieces as you’” (329). Rose again puts the role of women in domestic terms when she tells Herbert that, with Lizzy aiding his escape, “‘there’s not a thimbleful of danger’” (327).

Such repeated use of domestic symbolism seems to serve a conflicted purpose: Sedgwick either intends to emphasize the power that women can gain through domestic labor and manufactures, or to undercut the threat of female aggression by covering that aggression with terms of matronly care. Rose’s use of domestic manufactures in such defiant fashion in some ways recalls the contemporaneous note of defiance being raised by artisans rebelling against changes in the market economy. Rose forges another possible connection between the future of American freedom and the working class when she says of the American prisoners in the British jail, “‘It is not for me to venge them, but God will. Their children shall be lords in the land, and sound out their father’s names with ringing of bells and firing of cannon, when you…have rotted and died like dogs, as ye are’” (330). Rose’s championing the rights of the downtrodden suggests the possibility of a new egalitarian order in America. While Rose begs off having any role as avenger, her exchange with the British
jailers ends on a note of defiance: “‘I’ll not let out, while the war lasts—while the war lasts, remember, that you were strung up there by a ‘d—n nigger’—a nigger woman!’” (331).

The second conservative framework put to varying purpose by Sedgwick is that of natural aristocracy. At the opening of the text, Sedgwick argues that leadership and status should be determined by virtue rather than some artificial marker; thus, though “Eliot Lee’s parentage would not be deemed illustrious…graduated by nature’s aristocracy (nature alone sets a seal to her patents with universal authority), he should rank with the noble of every land” (25). Later in the text, however, Sedgwick does not merely espouse an abstract equality of personal worth but a more concrete system of leveled opportunity and social status. As she expresses—significantly, from the mouth of Israel Putnam—“‘the time is coming when one man that’s no better than his neighbor won’t wear stars on his coat, and another that’s no worse a collar round his neck; when one won’t be born with a silver spoon in his mouth and another a pewter spoon, but all will start fair, and the race will be to the best fellow’” (157). Putnam’s prophecy thus echoes Harry Lee’s description of social inequality in “A Story of Shays War”—and thereby reinforces the message of the earlier story that inequality and ill-treatment justify resistance. This program of removing all aristocratic trappings is restated with an even greater working class emphasis by Rose. Upon the conclusion of the war, as British soldiers board ships docked at the Battery in preparation for their return to England, Rose notes that “‘this a’n’t to be the land for them that strut in scarlet broadcloth and gold epaulets, and live upon the sweat of working people’s brows. No, thank God—and General Washington’” (355).

One venue through which activists advanced a working-class brand of republicanism was the public celebrations of nineteenth century New York. Such celebrations were central
to the memory and identity of the working class. The self-identified worker Walt Whitman is a prime example. Whitman often recalled Lafayette’s appearance in Brooklyn and wrote himself into the action, claiming that as a child he had been picked up and (in some versions of the story) kissed by Lafayette (Reynolds Whitman 34). Workingmen participated in these celebrations to show their patriotism and because such efforts, like their spending time in the artisan library, would allow them to lay claim to a greater degree of political agency within the nation. As Sean Wilentz asserts, taking part in patriotic ceremonies “announced the artisans’ determination to be part of the body politic—no longer ‘meer mechanicks,’ no longer part of the vague lower and middling sort of the revolutionary mobs, but proud craftsmen, appearing for all to see on important civic occasions, marching in orderly formation up and down lower Broadway with all the regalia and tools of their crafts” (Chants 90). David Waldstreicher goes even further, arguing that artisan participation in nationalist ceremonies and processions not only suggested an alternative political reality but, at least for the duration of the event, actually instantiated that alternate political reality: “celebrations were never merely tools used by political factions to gain followers,” he argues; “they were actual enactments of ideological alternatives” (Fetes 19). Perhaps because of the opportunities these celebrations offered to invert the social order, workers frequently exercised their rights to brandish banners, parade, and proclaim their political strength.

Through published accounts of such celebrations, the egalitarian message of the workers’ rights movement—and, as they saw it, of the Revolution itself—gained a broader footprint in American culture. This interchange between action and text—the celebration inspiring the report; the report shaping readers’ expectations and engagement with their own patriotic displays—illustrates what David Waldstreicher terms the “reciprocal constitution of
celebration and print” (Fetes 27). The printed text can serve as an extension of the democratizing work of the parade; moreover, the text itself, like the parade, can be seen as an “actual enactment” of the workers’ ideal society. It is in this context that we must view The Linwoods, which culminates with a description of an important Revolutionary celebration. By examining the ways in which Sedgwick uses this scene to engage with the labor reform movement—and to enact her own vision of an ideal egalitarian society—we can better comprehend the democratic thrust of this text.

Among New York artisans the greatest occasions of the year for patriotic display were the Fourth of July and Evacuation Day, the anniversary of Manhattan’s liberation from British control by the Continental Army. According to Wilentz, “even in their occasional ceremonies, the trades tried to assemble on July 4 or November 25, when they would ‘swear eternal allegiance to the principles of Republicanism’” (Chants 91). Sedgwick concludes The Linwoods with a scene—that in which Rose bids farewell to the retreating British—from the inaugural Evacuation Day. That occasion retained its significance among nineteenth century New Yorkers; as Sedgwick notes, “[the] 25th of November, 1783, was…a momentous day in this city of New York” as “we are annually reminded by the ringing of bells and firing of cannon” (350).

The Evacuation Day scene in The Linwoods caps Isabella’s political maturation, a process that partially entails sloughing off class prejudices. At the opening of the novel, Isabella’s views of the American rebels roughly correspond with her father’s; Mr. Linwood, of course, denounces the revolutionaries as lower-class rabble-rousers: “I know them,” he fumes, “a set of paltry schismatics—pettifogging attorneys—schoolmasters—mechanics—shop-keepers—bankrupts—outlaws—smugglers—half-starved, half-bred, ragged sons of
Belial; banded together, and led on by that quack Catiline, that despot-in-chief, Washington’’’
(147). While the events of the novel bring about only a partial alteration of Mr. Linwood’s views, the conclusion reveals Isabella as embracing the proponents of the American cause regardless of their rank.

Her sympathies were not limited to the few, the ‘bright, the immortal names’ that are now familiar as household names to us all. She saw the same virtues that illustrated them conspicuous in the poor soldiers; in that class of men that have been left out of the world’s estimate, and whose existence is scarcely recognized in its past history. (345)

This scene functions partially as a realization of Sedgwick’s ideal society: the ranks of the army represent an entire people united in virtue. At the same time, Sedgwick acknowledges that inequality undercuts the concept of a “natural aristocracy” which she uses to describe her ideal system of social organization.

This more aggressive assertion of egalitarian principles coincides with a shift in workingmen’s participation in patriotic celebrations in New York City. By the mid-1830s, Evacuation Day parades had taken on different class emphases. Whereas journeymen were able to find common cause with masters sufficient to see them marching together in the 1825 parade, “In the 1830s, even such ceremonial camaraderie could not be reconstructed; celebrations and symbols reappeared, but to define the rifts of class between masters and journeymen, not to celebrate the harmony of craft” (Wilentz Chants 96).

The “leveling” tendencies evident in Sedgwick’s configuration of “natural aristocracy” also resonate with the debate over policies of debt relief and military pensions. Well into the early national period, Revolutionary veterans from the lower classes continued to suffer for their service during the war. The majority of pensioners and applicants were members of the laboring classes. As John Resch writes, “By 1820, most claimants were laborers, artisans, or farmers in their mid-sixties. Most no longer owned real property and
they were unable to work at full capacity. …[T]hey were either destitute, poor or propertyless” (qtd. in Young Masquerade 236). These disadvantages placed veterans in a particularly perilous situation amidst the nation’s conversion to a market economy—a transition that found workers struggling to retain the dignity of their work, secure adequate wages, and limit the duration of the workday. Though workers gained some success in injecting their voice and interests into politics, they were nevertheless at the mercy of the market’s fluctuations as credit and commodity prices became more pronounced influences on the lives of Americans (Sellers 135-36). In the wake of the Panic of 1819, the government received over 28,000 pension applications—a number that reflects either a spike in the number of veterans in indigent circumstances or the extent of general desperation as the poor seized any available mechanism to appeal to the government for relief (Young Masquerade 234). Despite this outcry, the government continued its pattern of opposition to debt relief measures and other monetary policies that challenged the elite’s standing (Wood Radicalism 251-52). Conservatives, complaining of fraud and corruption within the pension system, as well its cost, pushed hard against any further liberalization of the policy (Young Masquerade 234).

Just as working class veterans found themselves written out of the pension rolls, so too were their roles minimized in the oral and written histories of the Revolution that emerged during the immediate post-war period. Civilian elites, capitalizing on republican distrust of standing armies, sought to gather to themselves credit for the success of the Revolution and, consequently, gain power in the new republic. According to those who coordinated and financed the colonies’ resistance—and, eventually, according to many other common Americans who did not themselves serve in the military—soldiers’ service did not
merit an enduring legacy. As Charles Royster explains, “Americans decided that they owed their independence less to their army than to the national virtue and courage that the soldiers partially and temporarily embodied” (329-30). “To believe that public virtue had the strength to sustain independence,” Royster continues, “Americans wanted to believe that public virtue had won it. This belief underlay the reinterpretation of the war, in which civilians could portray themselves as the rescuers of the army at Valley Forge rather than the main cause of the army’s hardship” (351).

The consequence of this revisionist history was that “[v]eterans of the Revolutionary War did not acquire unique admiration until the nineteenth century” (Royster 329). Only in 1832 did Congress approve a general pension fund for those who could establish service of six months or more in the cause of their nation (Young Masquerade 191). In revising the law, the government also relaxed the requirements of proof necessary to secure a pension (191). This amendment partially explains the proliferation, between 1820 and 1840, of written lives of veterans; during this period an estimated eighty-thousand such narratives appeared, including that which became the source text for Herman Melville’s Israel Potter (1854-1855) (8).

In writing The Linwoods—and in rewarding her fictional heroine Lizzie Bengin with a pension—Catharine Sedgwick provides a counter-narrative that reinscribes common Americans as central to the history and future of the nation. Such acts of inscription did not function on a merely rhetorical plane; rather, literary discussions of unrewarded Revolutionary sacrifice served to promote redistributive projects including pension reform and debt relief legislation. Sedgwick’s opposition to unjust practices of debt collection can be inferred from her “Story of Shays’ War,” as well as from the events of The Linwoods. An
example of a text in which the discourses of Revolutionary memory and debt relief explicitly intersect—as opposed to Sedgwick’s more implicit connection between the two—is Asa Greene’s 1834 novella, The Debtor’s Prison: A Tale of a Revolutionary Soldier. Greene’s text “illustrate[s] some of the evils attending IMPRISONMENT FOR DEBT…” while gently satirizing the popular influence of Cooper’s Revolutionary romances (iii). The narrative begins with a sentimental appeal that would soon become a trope reproduced in such abolitionist texts as Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave”: the fireside reverie of an old man and his family is disturbed by the intrusion of a careworn fugitive. In the case of Greene’s narrative, however, the mysterious stranger is not an escaped slave fleeing from bondage, but rather an aged Revolutionary soldier seeking to elude the pursuit of his creditors. As the aging veteran makes clear, imprisonment for debt was configured by reformers as a betrayal of the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence:

By the blood of these men our Independence was achieved: and the principle was established, that all mankind are born free and equal; and that each and every one has the undoubted right to the enjoyment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Such was the great principle for which we fought; such was the great principle which we established—at least in name. But how is it carried out in practice? Our citizens are deprived of their liberty, for no fault of their own. They are imprisoned for debt. They are punished for misfortune! (26-27)

Such sentiments were part and parcel of the Locofoco economic platform and, particularly during the Van Buren administration, they were increasingly incorporated into domestic policy (Wilentz Rise 510).

Rose’s prominent contributions to the pivotal moments of the text—her assistance in Herbert’s escape and her presence upon the Battery on Evacuation Day—suggest one further
possible field for conversion: race. Unlike Sedgwick’s stances toward women and workers, which she largely invests in her characterization of Isabella, the discussion of race in The Linwoods does not easily track the development of any one character. Regardless, the narrative construction of Sedgwick’s romance provides an opening up for the possibility of black agency.

The opening scene of the novel is one of several moments of disquieting racial humor contained in The Linwoods. Many of these moments involve the Linwoods’ servant Jupiter, whose disposition to superstition and inability to clearly state his meaning serve as moments of ostensible comic relief in the romance. At the opening of the novel, Isabella torments Jupiter by imagining that she sees ghosts prowling around the gibbet upon which rebellious slaves were once executed (9-11). The scene would seem to refer to the New York City slave rebellion of 1712, but also reflects the fear of African American violence that accompanied Nat Turner’s revolt of 1831 and which partially fueled the anti-abolition riots that broke out in New York City in 1833 and flared throughout the decade (Reynolds Brown 52, Whitman 48). Indeed, at the outset, Sedgwick’s novel seems informed by the reactionary racism that pervaded American culture in the wake of slave rebellions, and which also informed popular entertainments such as the minstrel show.  

However, later events in the narrative complicate this characterization. While Jupiter maintains his racialized depictions, the capable Rose offers a counter-example of African American character. At roughly the midpoint of the novel, Sedgwick begs leave “to interrupt our narrative, and recede some nine or ten years, to record the most remarkable circumstance in Rose’s life” (136). That circumstance is Isabella’s intervention in securing Rose’s freedom. Sedgwick employs sentimental tropes to explain Isabella’s decision to have Rose
freed. When Isabella asks Rose if she knows that she and her brother Herbert love her, Rose responds:

“Yes, and that lightens the yoke; but still it is a yoke, and it galls. I can be bought and sold like the cattle. I would die tomorrow to be free to-day. Oh, free breath is good—free breath is good!” She uttered this with closed teeth and tears rolling down her cheeks.

Tears on Rose’s cheeks! Isabella could not resist them, and pouring down a shower from her own bright eyes, she exclaimed, “You shall be free, Rose” and flew to appeal to her father. (136)

While Isabella’s influence is instrumental to gaining Rose’s freedom, it is important to note that Rose’s successful appeal rests not only upon her claims to a shared humanity but also her understanding of the value of freedom. Consequently, the scene testifies to the virtue of both characters, not merely of the white protagonist. Subsequent events in the novel, particularly her denunciations of British oppression, bear out Rose’s claims that she has earned her freedom.

Rose’s independence is to some degree qualified within the novel. When Rose gains her freedom, she immediately signs on as a servant for the Linwood family; as Sedgwick writes, “Rose’s condition was in no wise changed, but her mind was freed from galling shackles by the restoration of her natural rights, and she now enjoyed the voluntary service she rendered” (138). Sedgwick’s description of Rose’s “voluntary” service retains some degree of condescension, and her view the potentially vexed relationship between Rose and the Linwoods may have been modeled on that between Elizabeth Freeman and her own family. Freeman, a slave who earned her freedom through legal channels, displayed her gratitude toward her legal counsel, Theodore Sedgwick, by working as a servant in the employ of the Sedgwick family for the remainder of her life. Yet readers who would have expected an African American character like Rose to display only a compromised form of
agency would have been shocked by her aggressive actions toward the conclusion of the novel. Indeed, a provocative notice found in *The Plaindealer* suggests that Southern audiences responded to Sedgwick’s romance as an abolitionist text and one that consequently merited “the ban of the South” (“Mutilating Books” 102).

By resituating *The Linwoods* within the context of reform discourses, we can recover the text’s radical accents—accents which may have originated with Sedgwick’s own act of composition or which may have been generated by her readers. Sedgwick’s romance appeared at a pivotal time in the nation’s history, as appropriations of America’s Revolutionary history and political language—by an increasing number of individuals and movements and for wildly diverging purposes—exploded. As the post-Revolutionary generation, buffeted by disputes over slavery and class difference, sought to define for itself the meaning of independence, even the illusion of a superficial political consensus began to fade. Authors including Melville would revisit the Revolutionary romance with ironic purpose, or to advocate one of two competing nationalisms.

On working class racism, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*.

In describing the “American spirit” that “pervades” Sedgwick’s works, Leggett clarifies that “We means that sort of American spirit which leads her to shape the incidents of her story, the sentiments of her actors, and all the various circumstances of the fable, according to the actual conditions of things in this country, as they are modified by our political institutions…” (5). See also Widmer, *Young America*, 67.

In 1833, workers on the dry docks of Manhattan’s East Side erected a bell to toll the hours of the workday across the shipbuilding district that comprised the lower eleventh and thirteenth wards. The appearance of the Mechanics’ Bell in the shipyards marked the end of a two-year negotiation between the masters who supervised work on the docks and the journeymen in their employ; it also marked a new phase in the formation of a labor class identity among workers in New York (Wilentz *Chants* 137). A cadre of dockworkers first campaigned for the procurement of a bell to measure out the workday in 1831. Central to the negotiation was the workers’ demand for a ten-hour workday; regulation would ensure that workers were not being exploited by their employers. This sense of labor class identity also solidified around a shared understanding of America’s Revolutionary history. The dockworkers’ resistance to exploitation, and their proud attempts to assert their own interests, mirrored the cause of the disaffected colonists during the Revolution. The labor historian George McNeill solidified this connection when he wrote, “‘As the “Liberty Bell” rang out the proclamation of liberty from monarchical control, so the “Mechanics’ Bell” proclaimed the liberty of leisure for the sons of toil’” (quoted in Roediger 51). The Mechanics’ Bell thus serves as evidence of workers’ use of Revolutionary iconography to assert an identity rooted in patriotism and a conviction that the producing classes were the backbone of the nation. For the Mechanics Bell, see Perlman, “In Search of the Mechanics’ Bell.” Labor’s Heritage Vol. 6 No. 4, Spring 1995.

A fascinating point of intersection between racialized and Revolutionary discourse is P.T. Barnum’s Joice Heth exhibition of 1835. As James W. Cook points out, P.T. Barnum in August 1835 put on display in lower Broadway a new amusement featuring Joice Heth, an African American woman whom Barnum claimed was 161 years old and a former nurse of George Washington. This exhibit, which Cook describes as “a quintessentially antebellum American mixture of pseudo-scientific analysis, racist gawking, energetic patriotism, and pious musical entertainment,” reveals the extent to which Revolutionary history was becoming commodified: used for purposes both pious and irreverent, caught up in the debates of the day regarding science and race (5). The problematic racial characterizations of Barnum’s exhibit reveal the complicated relationship between the Revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and independence and the nation’s legacy of slavery. Barnum’s success in drawing working class as well as middle class Americans off of the streets and into his museums and exhibition halls also suggests the pervasiveness of racism in nineteenth-century American culture, particularly in the North. Heth’s public exhibition was widely advertised in the New York papers, including the *Evening Post*, which during late August 1835 ran an ad announcing that Heth “was the first person who put clothes on the unconscious infant who was destined in after years to lead our heroick fathers on to glory, to victory, and to freedom.” See *The New York Evening Post*, 24 August 1835. Rose’s freedom may have a biographical source in the tale of Elizabeth Freeman, a former slave who was employed in the home of Theodore Sedgwick. In her Autobiography, Catharine claims that Freeman—also known to the Sedgwick children as “Mumbet”—sought her freedom after being inspired by the Declaration of Independence. Sedgwick draws similar parallels between the Revolution and the abolition movement when she compares Freeman, now lying on her deathbed, to George Washington. Another biographical link between Sedgwick and the abolition movement is her nephew Theodore’s participation in the *Amistad* case. Theodore served as a defense attorney for the rebellious slaves. According to Wilentz, Theodore Sedgwick III, “more than any other figure, embodied Leggett’s Jacksonian abolitionism” (Rise 896). Despite her apparent sympathies for the plight of slaves, Sedgwick refrained from formally advocating abolition—a stance that drew the ire of her friend and fellow author Lydia Maria Child.
In June, 1848, the third session of the National Industrial Congress (NIC) convened in Philadelphia. The Congress’ roots stretched back to New York radicalism: its parent organization, the National Reform Association (NRA), was founded by a collective of Manhattan printers and featured among its initial number former members of the Locofoco Party (Lause 9). Among the resolutions passed by the 1848 Congress were proposals for the direct election of all government officials, as well as for limiting the workday to ten hours—policies previously advocated by Locofoco dissidents and the workingmen who rang the Mechanics’ Bell (Lause 17).

Yet the Congress convened in Philadelphia offered the promise of something entirely new. The diversity of the delegation—including reformers from nine states and from as far away as Kentucky and Illinois—revealed that a shared political identity, rooted in the interests of the producing classes, had spread far beyond the metropolis (Lause 157). Moreover, the Congress introduced a new spokesman of the cause of labor, one who, through his mastery of the burgeoning literary marketplace, would become the American workingman’s most well-known—and quixotic—advocate prior to the Civil War.

The star, and valedictory speaker, of the Philadelphia session of the NIC was George Lippard. Lippard had not previously been associated with any labor organization; rather, his
sensationalistic fiction, particularly his urban exposé, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall. A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (1844-45), garnered him a reputation as a champion of the workingman. As Lippard’s working class audience continued to grow, he rewarded its loyalty with increasingly bold declarations of his egalitarian leanings. By taking the stage at the NIC, Lippard set out to become, through his twin pursuits of activism and writing, a powerful weapon for the working class.

The place and time for the Congress seemed auspicious. As a center of craftsmanship during the Revolutionary period, Philadelphia had been the American birthplace of a developing “mechanic consciousness” (Eric Foner 62). By forming their own craft collectives, or by mustering into the militia, which became “an active radical force in Pennsylvania politics,” both masters and journeymen in Philadelphia forged a more “sustained political organization” through which they “articulated a fiercely egalitarian ideology” (62).¹ Such an ideology served as the basis for the Democratic societies through which Philadelphia workingmen attained a political voice and by means of which they helped elevate Thomas Jefferson and, later, Andrew Jackson to the White House.²

The NIC was intended to be a further step toward sustained political organization, building upon the successes of its less enduring predecessors such as the Locofoco. As a means of establishing purpose and precedent for the Congress, the organizers of the Philadelphia session drew upon the Revolutionary lore of the city. George Henry Evans—one of the founders of the NRA, a former Locofoco, and the man who coined the term “free soil”—referred to the Congress as an “Industrial Revolutionary Government, based upon the model of the Confederation of the States in 1776” (qtd. in Lause 70). In his valediction, Lippard—himself a native son of Philadelphia, raised near the battle site of Germantown,
who explored local Revolutionary history in his own lectures, sketches, and romances—similarly compared the convening of the Industrial Congress to the first political measures taken by the colonial revolutionaries:

…[A]s I cast my eye over the faces of the Representatives of Labor—over a Congress which symbolized the Industry and the Toil of the Union—my soul reverted to a day, some seventy-one years past, when only fifty-six farmers and mechanics met in a hall, not one mile from where I stand, proclaimed that All Men were equal in the sight of God—and all had a right to life, to happiness, and, of course, to Land and the fruits of Labor. ("Valedictory" 192)

For Lippard, the Revolution loomed as a triumph for the common man, the Declaration of Independence an affirmation of the natural rights of those humble soldiers who stood against the British. Unfortunately, the gains of the Revolution were not secure; workingmen’s liberty—which Lippard defined in terms of rights to “Land and the fruits of Labor”—had proven particularly vulnerable with the rise of the industrial economy, which transformed workers into “human machinery” ("Human Machines” 47). Though “[t]he Evils of our social system are manifold,” Lippard once wrote, “[t]hey may be forced into the Compass of two words—DEGRADED LABOR.” The rights of workingmen were perpetually assailed by corrupt elites, including the clergy, the “cotton Lord” of the South, and the “factory Prince” of the North (Quaker City 389). These cultural leaders paid mere lip service to the Declaration’s message of liberty; they kept up a pretense of equality while denying workers their rights. As Lippard lamented, for many Americans the egalitarian rhetoric of the Declaration appeared all too empty: “To tell a working man that he is free—that he has the right to vote according to his own will—that he is equal before the Law with the wealthiest Man in the Land, is a bitter mockery, unless you have first invested that working man with the lights of education and the strength of just and unchanging Laws” ([Secret Societies] 211).
The miserable condition of laborers, Lippard contended, was secured and perpetuated through those institutions erected by elites to maintain their own power. “Why are you always poor?” he asked. “Why does work—work without end or rest—always leave you in the ditch of life, exposed to the pang and insult of want, to the hard necessity of a life of misery and a death of friendless despair?” The answer, he responded, was “Because there is gliding between you who produce and the consumer of that which you produce an Idle Man who, working never himself, lives by laying a tax upon both producer and consumer….The Idle Man is often called Capitalist; very often Employer; not unfrequently does he appear in the shape of the Money Broker and Note Shaver” (“Men Who Work” 197). Lippard’s conviction of the inherent conflict between capital and labor led him to denounce America’s capitalist system as engineered to bring about the degradation of the working classes. “You can degrade labor in many ways,” he explained. Chiefly, American capitalists had secured power over their workers by erecting unequal systems of law and enforcement between rich and poor; by failing to provide workers with an education “which will enable [them] to battle with the educated oppressor”; and by holding those who do not labor, including “the Office Vampire and Stock Gambler[,] more honorable in a social point of view than the man who works—who produces with hand and brain—that which society needs for its subsistence or its comfort” ([Secret Societies] 211).

Though Lippard denounced the divisions of labor—as well as the fundamental division between capital and labor—that ensued from the modernization of the market, he did not promote pre-capitalist artisan production as the solution. To be sure, in his historical fiction Lippard waxes nostalgic for the independent artisan, a figure who, as both entrepreneur and laborer, brought capital and labor into an uneasy truce (Eric Foner 40).
his activism, however, Lippard joined Evans and other reformers in the belief that
“[c]ooperatives among working people provided an essential counterweight to the
cooperation of elites implicit in capitalism” (Lause 65).

At the time of his oration, Lippard saw hopeful signs that the fortunes of workers
worldwide were brightening. Continued organization among American laborers, coupled
with European uprisings and the foundation of the National Workshops in France, seemed to
signal that a new revolutionary age was opening. Moreover, recent events in the American
West held the promise of furnishing workingmen with the means to establish an independent
existence. Lippard, like many agrarian reformers, held out hope that the lands recently
acquired through the war against Mexico would enable workingmen to establish a
“Land…unpolluted by Black or White Slavery” (“Valedictory” 194). The independent
settlements of the West, free from the exploitative practices of capital, would enable workers
to cooperatively supply all of their needs. Further, the war against Mexico appeared to
provide common Americans with a new populist champion in the mold of Andrew Jackson.
Zachary Taylor, the leader of American forces in Mexico, appeared poised to assume the
Presidency in the fall election. After soliciting, and receiving, Taylor’s assurance that he was
supportive of the European revolutionaries, Lippard pledged his support to Taylor and
became a tireless campaigner for the former general (Reynolds Lippard 17).³

Optimism regarding the cause of Labor infused Lippard’s speech. “I know that the
cause must triumph,” he asserted:

I know that the day comes when the interests of the Rich and Poor will be
recognised in their true light,—when there shall be left on the surface of
this Union no Capitalist to grind dollars from the sweat and blood of the
workers, no Speculator to juggle free land from the grasp of unborn
generations. When every Man who toils shall dwell on his own ground,
and when Factories, Almshouses, Jails, and the pestilential nooks of great
cities, shall be displaced by the Homesteads of a Free People.
(“Valedictory” 193)

The conflict between capital and labor, in Lippard’s view, also served as the motivating force behind the American Revolution, which became a favored backdrop for his fictions. Lippard produced nearly one hundred Revolutionary tales and romances amidst his prolific output of journalism, historical writing and lecturing, and the fictions of urban crime for which he is best known today. Many of these Revolutionary tales would be collected in Washington and His Generals; or, Legends of the American Revolution (1847), and, in their various forms, would reach a wide audience and leave an indelible imprint on Americans’ understanding of their Revolutionary history (Reynolds Lippard 13). In these narratives, the British aggressors share the same vices as the elites of industrializing Philadelphia: driven by lust and intemperance, they invade the homes and shatter the livelihoods of American workers and their families.

In his narratives of nineteenth century Philadelphia, Lippard likewise drew upon the iconography of the Revolution to illustrate how far America had fallen from its founding ideals. One such vision, of “The Last Day of the Quaker City,” anticipates an apocalypse brought upon by the erosion of republican virtue among the inhabitants of Philadelphia. Gazing upon the imagined rubble of Independence Hall, he prophesized: “‘In yonder ruined Hall, America was born, she grew to vigorous youth, and bade fair to live to a good old age, but – alas! alas! She was massacred by her pretended friends. Priest-craft, and Slave-craft, and Traitor-craft were her murderers’” (388). If America continued on its current track of materialism and excess, monopoly and exploitation, it would incur the wrath of God. During “The Last Day of the Quaker City,” the once proud city of Philadelphia is enveloped in fire,
its buildings rocked by earthquakes and its inhabitants, rich and poor alike, “dashed in fragments on the earth” (390-91).

Through his “legends” of the Revolution, George Lippard sought to solidify the American brotherhood: to recommit the nation to its founding ideals; to instill in its people pride in the exploits of both the heroes and the anonymous soldiers who filled the ranks of the Continental army; to champion the cause of the downtrodden against those who abused their power and influence; and to advocate the necessity of revolution—peaceful, if at all possible, but bloody if need be—as a means of rejecting injustice.

Lippard remains among the most important and, during his time, popular, promoters of the radical legacy of the Revolution. Gary Nash makes the case for Lippard’s continued recovery by pointing out that he was among the first of a group of “radical activists…worried about the conservative, reverent, tragedy-free core narrative being peddled in schoolbooks and popular histories by a genteel band of white male writers” (xxiii). To properly recover Lippard’s place in American literary history, we must account for his astounding success in popularizing a truly radical understanding of the ideals associated with the nation’s founding. We must also consider the tragedies of Lippard’s career in literature and activism, chief among them the disappointment of his hopes for Zachary Taylor and the failure of what he saw as an impending millennial transformation of society both in America and abroad. There is a sad irony that the war against Mexico that Lippard so vociferously supported—and dramatized in yet another series of legends—foreclosed many of the possibilities that he had envisioned for American brotherhood and set the nation on a path for civil war.
“Among the many wretches who skulk in the dens of a large city,” George Lippard writes in a Revolutionary sketch titled “The Violator of the Grave,” “there is one whose very name excites a sensation of overwhelming disgust. Polite language has no name for this wretch, who like a fiendish beast makes a meal from the dead, but in the language of those who purchase his wares, he is called a Body-Snatcher” (Washington 461).

Coming from Lippard, who made a career out of exposing the secret dangers of the antebellum city and of inspiring a mix of horror and titillation in his readers through his racy and gore-soaked fictions, this is a promising opening. In this instance, however, Lippard evokes the horrors that transpire in the darkened passages of the city only to illustrate their analogues in polite society. Whereas in The Quaker City Lippard cast elites—ministers, politicians, bankers, and judges—as the perpetrators of murders, rapes, and countless other acts of moral and sexual deviancy, here his focus is on what we would today consider their “white collar” crimes:

The thief who shivering in rags and gnawed with hunger rots in the ditch, has his parallel in the Thief who dressed in satin, sits perched on a banker’s desk, robbing widows and orphans with religious deliberation. So the Hangman who chokes to death for a few dollars, reminds us of the Bribe Judge, who for his price—say a thousand dollars—will sentence to the gallows an innocent man, or set free the murderer of a mother….But where shall we find the fellow of the grave-violator—the Body-Snatcher of polite life? (461)

Lippard ultimately reveals his parallel for the ghastly “grave-violator”: the genteel historian who stains the reputations of heroes of the past. “This Body-Snatcher of the lecture room does not ravage graveyards; no! History is a graveyard to him, and he tears souls from their shrines, and withers hearts into dust. …Behold him as he stands there, before his aristocratic audience, in his sober black apparel and skull-like face; listen to his voice, as for
a weary hour, he belabors dead men with libels, calls their corpses—Coward! and lets his base soul forth, to slander among the graves of heroes” (462).

The particular object of Lippard’s scorn in this sketch is one such historian, who has used his lectures and literary reviews to cast aspersions on the character of Thomas Paine. This was no isolated attempt to smear Paine. As Nash explains, Paine’s reputation “had gone into deep eclipse” in the early nineteenth century, largely as a result of his “attack on Christianity in The Age of Reason…[which] left Paine an unattractive person in polite circles and deeply offended churchgoing people” (xxv). Yet, as Bernard Bailyn points out, a political backlash against Paine began almost immediately upon the publication of Common Sense (1776); this backlash was the work “not only [of] loyalists but also…some of the most ardent patriots who feared the tendencies of Paine’s constitutional ideas as much as they approved his plea for Independence” (286-7). Future proponents of the Constitution and members of the Federalist party, in particular, recoiled at Paine’s vision of a government comprised of a unicameral legislature. The absence of an upper house of congress, akin to the British House of Lords, which could serve as an aristocratic check on the power of the people, Bailyn explains, led these critics to consider Paine’s plan for the government an “attack on the traditional conception of balance as a requisite for liberty” (285). According to John Adams, the government system advocated by Paine “was so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work” (qtd. in Bailyn 288-89).

Inheritors of Adams’ conservative ideology saw many such “evil works” in Lippard’s Philadelphia; the period of Lippard’s career—from the early 1840s through his death in 1854—was marked by “church burnings, religious and racial riots, severe economic
depression, labor strikes, Millerite prophecies of impending doom, and fierce gang warfare” (Reynolds Lippard 9). The extent of the turmoil revealed that the Revolution had in fact freed the democratic passions of the people—or, rather, as Gordon Wood points out, it had freed the democratic passions of “White males [who] had taken only too seriously the belief that they were free and equal with the right to pursue their happiness” (Radicalism 368). Yet much of the violence, fueled by racism and antagonism between classes and sects, was generated by—or directed at—those who believed that the egalitarian promise of the Revolution had not yet been achieved. It was these radical forces, fueled by calls for reform from abolitionists, labor leaders, and radical democrats, that conservatives sought to repel by repressing Paine’s calls for revolution.

Lippard’s contemporary antagonist continues this conservative project by attacking Paine’s credibility, declaring Common Sense, his signature contribution to the revolutionary cause, “‘a book of no particular merit, owing its celebrity and power to its being well-timed’” (465). Lippard’s retort drips not with blood but with sarcasm: “That Common Sense should have been well-timed, seems a small thing in our reviewer’s eyes. To be sure, it aroused a nation into Thought, or rather, gave its burning thought a tongue as deep and tempestuous as the voice of thunder; to be sure, it wrote the word ‘Independence’ in every heart, by one bold effort, prepared the way for the Declaration, yet still it is a very tame affair: merely ‘well-timed’” (465).

Lippard’s defense of Paine is in many ways instructive regarding the manner in which he envisioned his literary and historical mission. Historical narratives, Lippard determined, could be powerful forces for liberation; however, genteel historians used their influence as cultural arbiters to ensure that history served as a means of social control. “The thing which
generally passes for History," Lippard wrote, “is the most impudent, swaggering bully, the most graceless braggart, the most reckless equivocator that ever staggered forth on the great stage of the world” (qtd. in Nash xxvi). By savaging Paine’s reputation, the historian and his genteel audience suppressed the liberating narrative of the colonists’ revolt against the British—a revolt that Paine was instrumental in inspiring. Thus, in the conflict between himself and the unnamed reviewer, Lippard saw hanging in the balance control of both the inspiring narrative of the Revolution, as well as the course of the nation’s future.

Lippard concerned himself particularly with the American workingman and the manner in which he was affected by the dynamics of history. The workingman’s efforts to counteract those forces that degraded labor, Lippard became convinced, would not find their place in history books until a radical change in society took place. “[T]he men who do the work of Reform are not often favoured with a niche in the temple of history,” he informed his readers. “Still,” he continued, “they do the work” (“Workers” 196).

Very humble men, toiling with their hands for daily bread, they set in motion the car of destiny and give the first impulse to the wheel of Revolution. The car crushes them, and the wheel bends them, and their names are blotted out in history—but their work lives. Think of this, ye Thousand workers of America who, now in workshop and at loom, are planning and doing the welfare of mankind. Your work will live. But your names will be blotted out. History is not for such as you. (196)

For both Lippard and Webster American history is a tale of progress; yet the divergence between Lippard’s editorial and the Bunker Hill oration, during which Webster praised the safe regularity of the “great wheel of liberty,” is stark. Webster’s celebratory formulation poses Great Men at the helm of the nation, ensuring safe passage; progress does not consist of the pursuit of “liberty” itself, for it is already secured, but rather its extension by bringing American institutions (markets, transportation, etc.) into correspondence with that goal. Lippard’s formulation, as Nash has claimed, blends triumph with tragedy; his ideal of
Revolution, triggered by the popular impulse of “humble men,” aspires to the unachieved end of achieving liberty for the working men upon whom society is built.

Though the narrative of American history purveyed through popular histories and historical lectures focused mainly on the character and achievements of the Founders, historical fiction of the early nineteenth century increasingly emphasized the role of “ordinary people as agents of revolutionary change” (Nash xxiii). A list of the heroes of the Revolutionary romances of the 1820s and 1830s reads like a survey of the working classes in industrializing America; taking their place in the revolutionary cause were poor peddlers, farmers, sons of tavern owners, women, and even former slaves. Such figures served to elevate the stature of the common man both in nineteenth century society as well as in the nation’s Revolutionary history. Lippard’s portraits of common Revolutionary soldiers furthered the message of social justice so central to the conclusion of Sedgwick’s The Linwoods. Early in his career Lippard’s fiction reflected an interest in the escapist potential of the romance; however, by the late 1840s, he would declare that “a literature which does not work practically, for the advancement of social reform, or which is too good or too dignified to picture the wrongs of the great mass of humanity, is just good for nothing at all” (qtd. in Reynolds Lippard 55). Historical fiction, Lippard believed, was the best vehicle for this social project, as well as for the project of cultivating a national literature.

Amidst his political journalism and fiction writing, Lippard produced a good amount of cogent literary criticism. Among the more prescient positions he assumed in his criticism include praise for the psychological experimentation of his friend Edgar Allan Poe, as well as his fellow Philadelphian Charles Brockden Brown. Lippard’s advocacy of these writers sheds light on his own narrative experiments, particularly his adaptation of gothic
conventions to the urban environment and the inventiveness of his later fictions which tend toward surrealism. Lippard’s criticism also contains laudatory treatment of several authors famous for their historical works. “Oh,” he wrote in 1844:

is it not a burning shame that a land which has given birth to men like Charles Brockden Brown, J. Fenimore Cooper, W.G. Simms, Washington Irving, N.P. Willis, Edgar A. Poe—a land which is everlastingly boasting of its wisdom, its freedom, its greatness—should raise a colossal pillar, high above all its institutions, and perch on that pillar’s capital a leprous beggar, whom it worships as the—God help us—the Incarnation of American Literature. (qtd. in Reynolds Lippard 94)

The “leprous beggar” to which he refers here was the sentimental fiction that seemingly dominated the literary marketplace. Like Hawthorne, Lippard championed a cerebral historical fiction to combat sentimentalism; unlike Hawthorne, however, Lippard sold sufficiently well to garner the attention, if not the approbation, of one of sentimentalism’s key institutions, Godey’s Ladies Book (Reynolds Lippard 18). Lippard was quick to recognize the political ramifications of—and potentially lucrative market for—imaginative explorations of the past and, in the same year in which he published this plea for a new outlook on American literature, he proposed a new venture, Lippard’s Magazine of Historical Romance. Lippard boasted in his communications with potential contributors—including Cooper—that the new monthly would aid the development of a native literature and would become a prime venue for serialized fiction; each issue would launch some major new work of historical fiction. Though Cooper failed to comply—and the journal ultimately failed to materialize—Lippard’s attempt to establish the magazine set him on the path toward his later achievements as an author and critic (Reynolds Lippard 9).

Two years after the aborted magazine launch, Lippard achieved perhaps his most enduring success as a popularizer of Revolutionary mythology through his legend of July 4th, 1776. “Let me paint you a picture on the canvass of the Past,” Lippard enjoins his reader at
the opening of this tale. On the Fourth of July, 1776, a crowd has gathered outside the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. The crowd includes “the Merchant in his velvet garb and ruffled shirt; …the Mechanic, with apron on his breast and tools in his hands;…the bearded Sailor and the dark-robed Minister, all grouped together” (Washington 391). All await news of the work being completed inside Independence Hall. Meanwhile, an aged mechanic is perched in the bower of the State House straining to read the inscription on the bell hanging there: “Proclaim Liberty to all the Land and all the Inhabitants thereof”(392). Upon receiving the command, the old man strikes the bell, which tolls out tidings that the Declaration of Independence has been signed. Concluding his tale with a flourish, Lippard compiles laudatory descriptions of each of the signers—“fifty-six traders, farmers and mechanics…assembled to shake the shackles of the world”—while proclaiming the liberating power of “that Bell [which] awoke a world, slumbering in tyranny and crime!” (393).

Despite its many inaccuracies, Lippard’s legend—which first appeared in the Philadelphia Saturday Courier on January 3, 1846—gained widespread cultural currency. Over the course of the following sixty years, historians re-circulated the details of the full gathering of the signers in Independence Hall and the ringing of the bell on the Fourth—details that were purely the product of Lippard’s imagination. Nevertheless, the particulars of the legend reappeared, as David Reynolds notes, in the pages of such reputable historical texts as Benson J. Lossing’s Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution (1850), John Franklin Jameson’s Dictionary of United States History (1894), and John H. Hazelton’s The Declaration of Independence (1906). Beyond its literary legacy, Lippard’s legend also sparked the nation’s fascination with the Liberty Bell as a Revolutionary artifact; the
adoration of the Liberty Bell that continues to this day, Reynolds contends, is “a direct result of George Lippard’s sky-scraping fancy”(Lippard 65).7

Using such responses to Lippard’s work as an indicator, Reynolds has written of the author’s cultural influence:

A conservative assessment is that Lippard was the most visible of several novelists of the period who brought to historical fiction a new fiery jingoism that kindled the chauvinistic pride of thousands of Americans. A bolder, yet not unwarranted, generalization is that Lippard shaped this nation’s patriotic self-image to a degree equaled by no American novelist before him and by few novelists of any period. (Lippard 71)

What remains to be answered is to what end Lippard shaped America’s historical consciousness. The Liberty Bell tale contains few clues as to the degree to which Lippard’s radical politics filtered down to his readers; rather, the straightforward narration, encompassing view of society gathered on the State House lawn, and celebratory tone suggest that the tale owes its enduring influence to its adherence to a mainstream nationalist vision of American history. Indeed, the jingoistic qualities of Lippard’s fiction to which Reynolds refers appear increasingly problematic when one situates them in their contemporary political context, when the various classes represented by the figures on the State House lawn came into increasing conflict. Lippard’s later Revolutionary fictions, as well as his legends of the Mexican War, likewise have their problematic aspects. Though Lippard’s waving of the banner of expansion during the Mexican campaign, in particular, requires critical examination, those considerations of Lippard’s legacy limited to his jingoism leave out the intellectual rigor of his work and overlook the extent to which those works enter into dialogue with important texts on political reform and the rights of labor. It is possible, without discounting the casualties of Lippard’s vision of empire, to locate in his works a thoughtful and truly radical philosophy of socialist reform.
Lippard’s radical influence on the American historical imagination in part can be measured by his success in rehabilitating Paine’s reputation. His response to the unnamed historian was simply one engagement in a prolonged campaign; subsequent to the publication of *Washington and His Generals*, in which “The Violator of the Grave” appears, Lippard produced *Thomas Paine, Author-Soldier* (1852), a consideration of the author’s life and works. This volume sparked a renewed sense of interest in the revolutionary writer. New editions of Paine’s work soon appeared, and, within a few short years, Paine had been reclaimed by many Philadelphians as a celebrated son of the city (Nash xxv).⁸

Of course, Lippard could not manage this project without generating a good deal of controversy. His volume on Paine concludes with another instance of pure authorial invention: as Lippard tells the story, Paine, the notorious critic of Christianity, accepted the error of his ways and adopted the Christian faith on his deathbed. Though rival historians and editors cried foul, Lippard stuck to his story. To be sure, he could draw on ample precedent for his improvisations with historical source material. For example, Mason Locke Weems’s biography of George Washington, among the first popular histories successfully marketed to a middle class audience, contained a similarly revisionist account of the first president’s religious beliefs. Weems goes even further than Lippard, transporting Washington beyond his deathbed and concluding his volume with a vision of Washington glorified in heaven. The appeal of Weems’s biography, George Forgie contends, was the author’s ability to turn Washington’s life into a moral tale suited to the lessons of the emerging market economy (39).⁹

Lippard, in turn, sought to the eliminate the rougher edges of Paine’s life story; moreover, he set out to explain the relevance of Paine’s works to a reading public that was
contending with the consequences of the economic transformations that Weems had
witnessed only in their infant stages. As Gary Nash asserts, Lippard’s success in recovering
Paine for a nineteenth century audience was a product of his emphasis on Paine’s vision of
liberty: “Lippard rescued him as the unswerving herald of democracy who had more to say to
the struggling mid-nineteenth century urban masses than all the revolutionary generals and
statesmen” (xxv).

Lippard thus evidences a complex understanding of the nature of historical “truth.”
Adhering to what he saw as the true contours of the nation’s history—that his was a country
founded upon principles of religious and political freedom and secured through heroic
labor—meant that Lippard could fashion particular details in any way he saw fit. Thus, the
very real tradition of artisan activism in Philadelphia freed him to imagine the signers of the
Declaration of Independence as humble “mechanics” and “farmers” rather than elites.
Though Lippard’s biography of Paine was the product of similar economic imperatives—
including the need to provide a buffer against economic change, as well as to capitalize on a
popular narrative—as Weems’ treatment of Washington, the radical purposes to which
Lippard employs his narrative reveals that it is less of a piece with Weems’ text than it is
with, say, Whitman’s Free Soil editorials in which the poet-reporter portrays Thomas
Jefferson as an ardent abolitionist (Earle 163-64).

Throughout “The Violator of the Grave,” Lippard quotes extensively from Common
Sense as a means of refuting his antagonist’s claims regarding Paine, while at the same time
reacquainting his readers with the power of Paine’s words. The selections that Lippard
makes from Paine’s pamphlet also reflect his own values and sentiments. Taken collectively,
they sketch an outline of Lippard’s political program, from his support for ethnic and
religious diversity to his commitment to radical reform as a means to social justice. By pursuing “The Violator of the Grave”—which is advertised in Washington and His Generals as being the “sequel” to the July 4th narrative—we can uncover the radical complement to Lippard’s more conventional adaptations of American history.

For Paine, the American Revolution was as much a cultural as a political conflict. While in a state of dependency to the government in Britain, the colonists were committed to the British constitution and its sense of subservience to the crown and to the aristocratic estate. To counteract his readers’ reluctance to join the rebellion, Paine saw the necessity of dispelling their sense of that dependent relationship. As a means of freeing his readers from their fright in taking a stand against the “mother country,” Paine had written that “Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe” (qtd. in Lippard Washington 466).

In the promulgation of elite culture Lippard saw a conservative attempt to monopolize and homogenize American identity, a campaign equivalent to the British effort to dominate the colonies. As a salvo against Anglophiles and cultural loyalists such as the genteel historian, Lippard sought to marshal Paine’s words in defense of a vibrant, multi-ethnic, and religiously diverse culture. Lippard—a member of the large German immigrant community in Philadelphia—took solace in Paine’s conception of America as a nation of refugees, and celebrated the Declaration’s commitment to religious liberty. Lippard viewed the United States as an inherently religious nation, though one that held to varying creeds and practices of faith. Seeking to foster a national religious spirit based on tolerance and sacrifice, he incorporated into his Revolutionary legends a narrative that traced that spirit of religious
liberty back to the permissive society of Pennsylvania as established by William Penn, “the
APOSTLE OF THE LIVING GOD TO THE NEW WORLD” (400). Religious toleration,
Lippard contended, played a major role in unifying the nation, “a Brotherhood founded by
the Men of Plymouth rock—by the Catholic of Baltimore—by the Quaker of the Delaware!”
(424).

Lippard’s legends also contributed to the regionally-informed narratives of
Revolution popularized during the 1820s and 1830s by authors including Cooper, Simms,
Hoffman, Kennedy, and John Neal, whose account of the battle of Brandywine in Seventy-
Six (1823) assuredly had an impact on Lippard’s tales of the same encounter. These
narratives served to democratize the nation’s founding history; in particular, they lodged a
cultural protest against the pervasive influence of New England’s political, religious, and
literary institutions.10 Lippard’s legend of William Penn significantly relocated the symbolic
founding of the nation to Pennsylvania from the oppressive society of Puritan New England;
as the first of the colonies to adopt a policy of religious liberty, Pennsylvania could claim its
right as the birthplace of the religious toleration announced in the Declaration. Moreover, as
Simms felt that the South had been squeezed out of the nation’s Revolutionary history, so did
Lippard contend that “the land of Penn has been miserably neglected” and that, “while we
love the North or the South for the Revolutionary glories, we must confess that the land of
Penn claims a glory higher and holier than either” (Washington 299). Lippard’s legends
incorporated local oral traditions into the history of the period. “There is not spot in the
land,” Lippard claimed, “—not even on the storied hills of the Santee, or the beautiful wilds
of the Kenebec—more hallowed of poetry and romance, than this same Wissahikon”
(Washington 99). Lippard’s legends had an indelible effect on his readers; they incorporated
the battles fought along the Wissahikon and Brandywine into the nation’s consciousness of Revolutionary history, and also inspired pilgrimages to the region’s Revolutionary sites. In 1853, a young Samuel Clemens, then working as a printer for the Philadelphia Inquirer, wrote to his brother Orion, “Geo. Lippard in his Legends of Washington and His Generals has rendered the Wissahickon sacred in my eyes, and I shall make that trip, as well as one to Germantown, soon” (qtd. in Reynolds Lippard 119). 11

Though all of these writers—including Simms, who imagined himself an advocate of Locofoco radicalism—shared democratic values, Lippard outdid his contemporaries in foregrounding issues of class and social justice in his Revolutionary narratives. After suffering through poverty and homelessness as a youth, George Lippard hit upon a job as a reporter for the popular Philadelphia penny weekly, The Spirit of the Times, whose motto—fittingly enough—was “Democratic and Fearless.” Lippard’s first Revolutionary legends made their debut in the pages of the Citizen Soldier, a Philadelphia weekly “Devoted to the Interests of the Volunteers and Militia of the United States,” in 1843. Lippard worked as a reporter and, ultimately, editor, for the Citizen Soldier before beginning to publish his historical tales in the Philadelphia newspaper The Saturday Courier (Reynolds “Introduction: George Lippard in His Times” 3-5). Between July, 1846 and December, 1848, Lippard published a series of sixty-two Revolutionary legends in the Courier. During the run of these legends, the Courier’s circulation jumped from 30,000 to 70,000—an increase for which Lippard deserves much of the credit (Reynolds Lippard 13).

Locating Lippard’s writing in the periodicals in which they originally appeared is important in coming to an understanding of the manner in which Lippard was able to link his work to radical action. Lippard’s second collection of Revolutionary legends, Washington
and His Men (1850) consisted of tales first published in the Quaker City Weekly, a journal he founded and managed from December 30, 1848 through June 1850 (Reynolds Lippard 17-18). There were several factors that contributed to Lippard’s decision to begin his own journal. Striking out on his own was certainly in line with his economic thinking; by becoming his own publisher, Lippard was able to remove the middle man—the capitalist—who could claim a disproportionate share of the profits.

The Quaker City Weekly, for which Lippard supplied nearly all of the content, also could more closely mirror his political views. As Shelley Streeby explains, “In Lippard’s story paper, story segments ran alongside book reviews of radical publications, letters to the editor about slavery, and the printed texts of public addresses by women’s rights activists such as Lucretia Mott” (“Story Paper” 181). Lippard’s paper thus created a “space where what we now tend to think of as ‘literature’ (poetry, stories, excerpts from novels) promiscuously mingles with public addresses, advertisements for meetings, letters to the editor, and articles that call for a working-class politics” (181). By taking into account this mingling of texts within the pages of the story paper, Streeby asserts, we can challenge certain fundamental assumptions regarding nineteenth century literature. First, this mixing illustrates that “the mid-nineteenth-century literary field was a heterogeneous and contested ensemble of sites that could support a variety of agendas”(181). Second, that mixing served “to construct new collective affiliations, practices, and institutions” (181). In other words, readers who encountered Lippard’s Revolutionary legends in these democratic publications—and particularly in the heavily labor-oriented Quaker City Weekly—would invest those tales (even those legends in which the author’s labor sympathies were not explicit) with the radical values reflected elsewhere in the journal.
Lippard also outdid his contemporaries in his vivid depictions of violence, which at times anticipated the realism of Civil War accounts by the likes of John DeForest and Ambrose Bierce. Lippard’s Revolutionary battlefields are littered with corpses, many of them savagely disfigured and destroyed in the battle. Lippard devoted painstaking detail to the particular evils of the British and their Tory allies, capturing their moral disorder through vivid descriptions of their deviant behavior.

By invoking British brutality as a justification for revolution, Lippard once again echoed Paine. Writing in 1776, months after the outbreak of hostilities but before Independence was officially declared, Paine saw his task in Common Sense as illustrating the necessity of separation between England and the colonies. Though severing cultural ties to England accomplished part of his purpose, Paine—who saw armed conflict as the only means of forcing that separation—felt the need to recruit men to fight against the British. The enormity of Britain’s offenses, Paine argued, should not be measured by their unjust tax policies; rather, they should be measured by British brutality in resisting the rebellion. In another passage reproduced in Lippard’s legend of the grave robber, Paine writes,

But if you say, you can still pass the violations over, then I ask, hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of a bed to lie on, or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover, and whatever may be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant. (qtd. in Lippard Washington 466)

In advocating the necessity of armed rebellion, Paine not only invoked the colonists’ belief in a sacred right to property, but also played upon his readers’ emotional connection to their family members and the patriarchal role of the father as protector of the family.
In numerous Revolutionary sketches and romances Lippard illustrates the shattering of American homes by British soldiers, capturing the horror of these offenses and providing such scenes of violence as justification for the colonists’ uprising. One example from Lippard’s legends of a soldier driven to revolt by the violation of his home and livelihood is “The Mechanic Hero of Brandywine.” The unnamed mechanic inhabits a rural version of the domestic ideal: “a quiet cottage, nestling away there in one corner of the forest road, a dear home in the wilderness” where he lives with his wife and young child, and alongside which lies his blacksmith shop (Washington 372). Upon the outbreak of violence between the British and the colonists, the blacksmith takes no side: “What cared that blacksmith, working away there in that shadowy nook of the forest, for war? What feared he for the peril of the times, so long as his strong arm, ringing that hammer on the anvil, might gain bread for his wife and child!” (372). Lippard’s mechanic is the model of the self-sufficient laborer, and his eagerness to remain removed from the violence surrounding him echoes Crevecouer’s American Farmer. The mechanic, however, becomes ensnared in the conflict when, while shoeing the horse of a Tory, he overhears details of a plot to trap George Washington. Since the mechanic “still had a sneaking kindness for this Mister Washington, whose name rang on the lips of all men,” he waits until nightfall before leaving his wife and child to deliver his news to the American camp (372). Upon returning to his home in the morning, he discovers the retribution meted out by the British and their Tory allies: his home and family have been destroyed. Initially hoping that a chance fire had sprung out and that his family may have escaped, he believes that, through honest labor, he may reclaim his livelihood: “With the toil of his stout arm, plying there on the anvil, he would build a fairer home for his wife and child; fresh flowers should bloom over the garden walks, and more lively vines trail along the
casement” (373). Ultimately, however, he discovers the charred remains of his wife’s body among the rubble of his house; he learns from a neighbor that, “‘the British they murdered your wife, they flung her dead body in the flames—they dashed your child against the hearthstone!’” (373).

Though on the surface a baldly sensational retelling of Revolutionary violence, the deeper resonances and cultural critique implicit in this tale reveal themselves when one considers the literary and political context in which Lippard was writing. In this tale and elsewhere, Lippard proves a master at manipulating literary trends and traditions to achieve his desired effects.

First and foremost, Lippard borrows the dominant plot of the Revolutionary romance—a plot established by Cooper in The Spy (1821) and subsequently adapted by Simms and many others—in which the family unit becomes endangered by violence and their loyalties to the emerging nation are tested. The symbolic resonance of this plot relied upon the popular configuration of the family as a representation of the nation. In numerous romances of the early republic, authors mirrored the challenges facing the young nation in domestic plots of conflict and resolution. Cooper, in particular, excelled in adapting this ideology into his historical fiction, depicting the potentialities of right marriage and patriarchy as means to reorient family members to their proper roles and responsibilities as citizens. In contrast to the romances of reconciliation popularized by the likes of Cooper, Simms, and Sedgwick, Lippard tends in his fiction not to envision the preservation of the family in the face of outside forces but rather to figure its destruction.

To understand the social function of these violent narratives, we need to consider the manner in which sensational fiction emerged as a response to changes in the literary and
social environment. On one level, sensational narratives such as that narrating the
destruction of the mechanic’s family gained an audience because of their shock value. Such
narratives satisfied the increasingly sensationalistic tastes of a certain segment of the
American readership. These violent narratives were Lippard’s ticket to literary celebrity;
through his urban crime romances in particular, he capitalized on the public’s ever-growing
appetite for “horror, gore, and perversity,” which, as David Reynolds remarks, were peddled
“in both the penny papers and in the closely allied genres of trial pamphlets and criminal
biographies” (Renaissance 171).

These new print forms—which, following innovations in print and transportation
technology, became cheap both to produce and distribute—became accessible and popular
among workers. As Michael Denning contends, the audience for penny papers—as for
subsequent manifestations of cheap fiction including the dime novel—was comprised
primarily of “workers—craftworkers, factory operatives, domestic servants, and domestic
workers” (27). Lippard’s career reveals that a reciprocal relationship developed between the
author and his working class readers. The Quaker City had propelled Lippard to a level of
success previously unmatched by any American author: over sixty thousand copies sold
within the first year of publication, while twenty-seven editions of the collected work
appeared between 1845 and 1849 (Reynolds “Introduction: George Lippard in his Times” 5,
Lippard 12). As Lippard became an increasingly popular figure in the world of cheap
periodical literature, he increasingly became an advocate for his readership. As Reynolds
contends, tracing the development of the Quaker City narrative through its serial installments
reveals that, following the success of the opening episodes among a working class
readership, Lippard tailored the conclusion of his romance—and his subsequent fictions—to
better appeal to the workers who soon became his primary audience (Lippard 55). Unlike other authors who catered to the tastes of lower class readers, Lippard’s cultivation of that audience was not a case of hoodwinking his readers but rather his coming to assume more firm positions on issues regarding which he already had egalitarian leanings. Though they have often been considered vehicles for escapist fantasy or, more insidiously, for mass deception, such popular literary forms as the penny paper and the story paper contributed to the broad critique of American culture also engaged in by such “high culture” figures as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville. Lippard used his fiction to launch an attack on those institutions that failed to serve their interests; in particular, he used his sensational narratives to criticize evangelical sentimentality and the nation’s elite-controlled economic infrastructure.

Lippard’s sensational fictions offered a direct challenge to the decencies proffered by sentimental culture. “Whereas the sentimental-domestic novelists dramatize a heroine’s steady progress toward domestic harmony through piety and virtue,” Reynolds explains, “Lippard pictures the shattering of homes as the result of obsession, betrayal, lust, and greed.” (“Introduction” xxii). As we have seen, those most prone to give in to their obsessions and passions in Lippard’s fiction were those who, due to their social standing and control of major institutions, believed they were above the law. Lippard particularly cast a critical eye on the religious institutions that, he believed, were complicit in the spread of injustice amidst the rise of the market economy. As Reynolds concludes, “Lippard not only exploits the sensational but also directs it against the values of home, church, family, and purity that were central to the sentimental-domestic sphere” (“Introduction” xxii). Lippard’s fiction offers myriad dramatizations of criticisms leveled by Ann Douglas at sentimental
culture, particularly its “obsession with popularity” and the fact that ministers had become “eager participant in the emerging consumer society” (7). “[I]t cannot be denied,” Lippard wrote, that “orthodox, and in many cases heterodox, Protestantism, is the paid vassal of usurped Capital…sworn to gloss over and sanctify anything that Money does. Is it a wonder that enlightened men, sick of such a mammon-bound, banking Protestant Church, are flying day by day to the Cloisters of Catholicism or the arid wastes of skepticism?” (“Can You Tell me” 101)

As depicted by Lippard, religious elites revel in their power and the deviant acts enabled by that power. Ministers such as the Rev. F.A.T. Pyne, one of the villains stalking the corridors of Monk Hall in The Quaker City, are figured as hypocrites. Pyne’s hypocrisy manifests itself both in the protective stance he takes toward the woman he supposes to be his daughter, Mabel—who, in private, he attempts to rape—as well as in his public temperance work, which is belied by his drug abuse. “‘We temperance folks must have some little excitement after we have foresworn intemperance,’” Pyne tells himself; “‘When we leave off Alcohol, we indulge our systems with a little Opium. That’s what I call a capital compromise’” (324, 391). Through the figures of the reformers slinking into Monk Hall, Lippard satirizes the reform efforts of evangelicals, whose causes sometimes seemed as trivial as those of the “‘Send Flannel-to-the-South-Sea Islanders Societies’” (qtd. in Reynolds Lippard 77). “Look around you,” Lippard advised his readers. “What does your Protestant Church,—the Church Proper,—do for Humanity? She has countless missionary societies abroad for the Heathern, but she sanctions all forms of wrong—Land Monopoly, Special Legislation, Bank swindling—at Home” (“Can You Tell me” 101).
Unlike those critics of sentimentalism who attacked the “cult” from a perspective outside of religion, Lippard’s denunciation of the clergy and ministry as corrupt stems from a deeply religious worldview. Raised as a Methodist, he trained to enter the ministry before abandoning a religious vocation in favor of the law, and, ultimately, authorship. Discouraged by the hierarchy within the Methodist church, Lippard generalized his critique of Protestant elitism, arguing that church reform movements simply masked their failure to “follow the Blessed Nazarene over the dust of the highway, behold him speaking hope to the desolate, health to the sick, life to the dead, eternal life to the Poor!” (Washington 406).

Lippard’s understanding of the gospel message of social justice was very much a product of the more radical manifestations of the Second Great Awakening. In the early nineteenth century, various Protestant sects increasingly stressed the democratic tenets of their faith; true believers forecast apocalypse stemming from a fall into sin—a fall already begun amidst the economic injustice of the day—or coming as the culmination of period of justice begun by the American Revolution and continuing through the liberation movements abroad. Lippard’s own apocalyptic visions, particularly that found in “The Last Day of the Quaker City,” manifest his own radical notions of the meaning of Christ’s return in judgment. Just as Lippard moved back though history to locate the origins of American religious toleration in the forest settled by William Penn, so did he regress even farther into history to locate the origins of the egalitarian spirit of the Declaration of Independence. In Washington and His Generals, Lippard includes a sketch of the onset of Christ’s religious ministry. Lippard’s Christ never surrenders his identity as the son of a carpenter. Whereas Christ in Luke’s gospel receives his formal call to ministry through his baptism in the Jordan, Lippard plants him at his workbench in the moment when, “as if a flood of light from the
thron of God, had poured down into his soul,” the “young Mechanic,” Christ, receives the “awful light” of the spirit (406).

As that boy – that apprentice boy – stands there, with a saw in one hand, the other laid on a pile of boards – a strange thought comes over his soul!

He is thinking of his brothers – the Brotherhood of Toil! That vast family, who now swelter in dark mines, bend in the fields, under the hot sun, or toil, toil, toil on, toil forever in the Workshops of the World. (405)

By proclaiming to workers, “‘LOOK UP BROTHER, FOR THE DAY OF YOUR REDEMPTION DRAWETH NEAR!’”, Lippard hoped to advance Christ’s message of social justice. Christ’s return in judgment fulfills the promise of his earthly vocation: the redemption of the poor (406-7).

Significantly, Lippard sought to counteract the evangelical emphasis on heavenly reward and focus on earthly justice. The other-worldly religiosity that pervaded American culture, Douglas contends, was “an inevitable part of the self-evasion of a society both committed to laissez-faire industrial expansion and disturbed by its consequences” (12). The remedy for such delusions, Lippard argued, was that “every man, should endeavor to put into practice those great truths of the Gospel, which especially proclaim that the Kingdom of God should be begun in this world, in order to go on in the next” (104). Drawing upon such religious philosophies—some would say heresies—as arminianism and spiritualism, Lippard “retrieved religion from doubtful metaphysical realms and planted it firmly in the physical world….” (Reynolds Lippard 88).

Just as he sought to capture in lurid detail the destruction of working class America at the hands of the powerful and influential, Lippard intended his fiction as a means of channeling the voice of “the mechanic in his tattered garb…as he ask[s] God’s vengeance upon the world that robbed and starved him” (Quaker City 372). Though Lippard’s accounts
of apocalypse do envision earthly justice, that justice is often fleeting. Even as they are “mingled together in the Massacre of judgment” (391), the workers of “The Last Day of the Quaker City” deem the fall of the powerful a “triumph worth all the deaths in hell”—a far different form of consolation than that put forward by sentimental reformers (383). Though Lippard primarily advocated peaceful means to reform, it is no accident that his manic account of apocalypse in Philadelphia reads like a call to class war. Informed by a theory of property rooted in labor derived from Locke, as well as Christian radicalism, Lippard articulated for his audience the worker’s right to revolution:

> when Labor has tried all other means in vain—when the Laborer is deprived of Land, of Home, and of the Harvest of his toil—when the Few will not listen to the voice of Justice, nor the Gospel of Nazareth—then we would advise Labor to go to War, in any and all forms—War with the Rifle, Sword and Knife—War, by the wrongs of Humanity, and in the name of that God who has declared his Judgement against the Robbers of Labor. The War of Labor—waged with pen or sword—is a Holy War. ([Workers’ Revolt] 219)

“The ‘Gospel of the Rifle’ in the hands of the Oppressed,” Lippard declared, “is a good Gospel when Tyrants will listen to no other” (218).

Beyond his crusade against religious hypocrisy, Lippard also worked to deflate the myth of the inviolate domestic space championed by sentimental reformers as a response to economic change. As the United States transitioned into a market economy—one in which the traditional locus of wealth and identity, land, became a commodity, and one whose monetary policy involved paper currency and transactions based on credit rather than an exchange of specie—the homespace came to be conceived of as a bulwark against the threat of economic loss as a result of speculation; as Gillian Brown asserts, domestic ideology “held women and the home as the embodiment and the environment of stable value” (3). Critics of the new economic system invested the home with symbolism that demarcated the domestic
from the public sphere and the fluctuations of the market, while in the legal realm changes to married women’s property rights served to provide an ostensibly secure and stable source of wealth to defend against the financial improprieties of husbands.\textsuperscript{15}

Though the separate spheres ideology that emerged from this economic context endured the string of financial panics that carried through the antebellum period, it was not without its critics. The threat posed to the domestic by economic reversals became the basis for a new genre of fiction. Mary Templin locates in the wake of the Panic of 1837 the genesis of the genre that she refers to as “Panic Fiction.” According to Templin, these works “dramatize [financial] failure in plots that revolve around the irresponsible behavior and decisions that lead to the brink of loss and/or the appropriate attitudes and actions to be taken once that loss has occurred” (3). The genre, which includes works by the likes of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and, later, Maria Cummins, challenges scholars’ understanding of female writers’ engagement with the economic issues of the period. Rather than evidence detachment from the realities of the marketplace, Templin argues, these texts “propose domestically oriented solutions to economic problems”; specifically, they advocate “domestic constancy”—maintaining middle class “domestic standards of neatness and gentility” in the face of economic fluctuation and reversal (2, 5).

While Lippard and other activists of the radical democratic tradition shared with these writers an abhorrence of speculation and the devastating effects it had on the family, the political solutions that they advocated differed greatly from those proposed by the producers of “Panic Fiction.” On the issue of debt relief, for instance, the contrast between their positions was clear. Political dissidents since the days of Shays’ Rebellion had advocated debt relief as a means of protecting workers against the ruthlessness of creditors, and debt
relief measures again became popular following the Panic of 1837. Middle class domestic reformers, on the other hand, campaigned against such measures, claiming financial management skills as a requisite attribute of the middle class. Beyond these political differences, the manner in which Lippard represents the threat posed by economic intrusion into the domestic differs considerably from that found in “Panic Fiction.” The acquisitive spirit of the capitalist market, which Lippard equated with and transposed into the deviancy of antebellum Philadelphia gentlemen and the violence of British soldiers “mad with carnage and thirsting for blood,” could not be left on the threshold; rather, it posed a constant danger of invasion to the home and its vulnerable inhabitants. In contrast to the tales of individual moral reform put forward by sentimental reformers, Lippard used his expansive fictions to advocate sweeping institutional reforms in keeping with radical Jeffersonian and Jacksonian notions of democracy.

As Charles Sellers explains, the devastation of the Panic of 1837 reflected an imbalance between the potentialities of capital and labor: at its root was the fact that “worldwide capital had again stimulated more production than its exploited labor could afford to consume” (354). The Panic unfolded amidst a series of disputes among Americans and their political representatives as to how the interests of capital and labor should be protected by the government. Chief among these disputes was Jackson’s assault on the national bank and the paper money system, two aspects of the economic infrastructure of the nation which Jackson deemed susceptible to misuse by those in power.

The concentration of power within the Bank of the United States, in particular, struck Jackson as being contradictory to the spirit of democracy (Wilentz Rise 361). As Sean Wilentz asserts, Jackson’s willingness to take on powerful interests within the nation was
central to his popular appeal; his “War” on the Bank of the United States served to forge an alliance between democrats who were distrustful of its machinations: “The bank’s role as an engine of commercial development rendered it dubious to those who felt excluded from its power and also among workingmen, farmers, and others who had suffered amid the uncertainties and displacements that commercial development had wrought” (366). In the message accompanying his veto of the Bank’s re-charter bill, Jackson wrote: “when the laws undertake to add to…natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their government” (qtd. in Wilentz 370). Jackson’s veto message secured his legacy as a defender of the interests of workers.

Yet Jackson’s war on the Bank of the United States was not without consequence for those workers. As Jackson and the head of the Bank, Nicholas Biddle, wrestled for control, Biddle set in motion a contraction of credit—intended to punish Jackson—with disastrous results (Wilentz Rise 400). Interest rates soared as citizens rushed on the banks; inability to pay on debts led to widespread business closures, and, ultimately, to unemployment and anger (Sellers 354-55). Though conservatives blamed Jackson for the economic downturn, radical democrats continued to villainize Biddle and the Bank.

Lippard joined this critique of “The Banking System,” which, he argued, “is, in its present state, that legalized form of robbery which enables the Speculator, the Broker, and the Capitalist to get rich upon the labor and misery of the masses. A Bank is the tomb of dead Labor” (“Banking” 169). Banks were the central engines of economic injustice,
Lippard believed, because they drove the paper money system that set capital above, and against, labor. Paper money, Lippard wrote, “is the REPRESENTATION OF LABOR. It is representative of past work, and the promise of future work. It is, in fact, the WORK OF THE MASSES, embodied in a strip of paper. This strip, manufactured in a Bank, enables me to OWN THE LABOR OF THE MILLIONS” (“Capitalist Conspirators” 82). Beyond driving the paper money system, banks were also responsible for the suppression of democracy: “Bankers rule the government, defraud the laborer of his hire, make the appointments to office, and paralyze the ballotbox” (“Banking” 170). Behind their messages of altruism and the general benefits of economic expansion, Lippard believed, banks disguised their own self-interested actions. “[B]anks derive their power from the supposition that they represent the amount of produce in the whole country,” he wrote. “They do indeed represent the amount but at the same time, they are the means of juggling the harvest of the Labor of the Many into the hands of the Few. When they honestly distribute the Labor and Capital of the country, among all the men whose Labor produces that Capital, no one will have reason to complain” (170). Taken as a whole the influence of the banks amounted to “a slow War which is more infernal than the War of the Sword….It is the War maintained by the Money Jobbers of the World against the Industrial classes” ([Workers’ Revolt] 218).

Led by such figures as William Leggett and George Henry Evans, and inspired by Jackson’s veto message, the industrial classes began to push back. Throughout the nation, workers collectively protested the abuses of the Bank. In Philadelphia, twenty thousand people—led “entirely by the working classes,” boasted one participant—gathered outside Independence Hall in May, 1837, to decry the banking system as one of “fraud and oppression” (Sellers 355).
Perhaps the most provocative reaction to this economic climate can be found in Lippard’s Revolutionary fictions, in which ill-treated workers including the mechanic of Brandywine seek vengeance on their British oppressors. “Go there to Brandywine,” Lippard urges his readers, “and where the carnage gathers thickest, where the fight is most bloody, there you may see a stout form striding on, lifting a huge hammer into light. Where that hammer falls, it kills – where that hammer strikes, it crushes!” (Washington 373-374).

Before the wounds of battle can take his life, the mechanic envisions one further act of violence: in a “voice husky with death,” the mechanic explains to another laborer-patriot, “I never meddled with the British until they burned my home, till they—’ he could not speak the outrage, but his wife and child were before his dying eyes—‘And now I’ve but five minutes’ life in me. I’d like to give a shot at the British afore I die….give me a powder-horn, three rifle balls an’ a good rifle; that’s all I ask” (374). In his final moments, the mechanic shoots down three more British soldiers, taking their lives in the names of Washington, “mad Anthony Wayne,” and his murdered wife.

Drastic measures would be necessary to bring about significant and meaningful change in society. Paine’s influence on Lippard can be felt in this regard as well; Lippard quoted and adopted Paine’s claim that, “If universal peace, harmony, civilization and commerce are ever to be in the happy lot of man, it cannot be accomplished but by a revolution in the present system of governments” (469). Lippard’s vision of revolution—a complex amalgamation of his religious, economic, and social views—was infused with craft pride evident in the Brandywine mechanic’s taking the tools of his trade into battle. The mechanic retains his class markers even as he assumes his place within national identity. This pride in the producing classes—both forms of labor are regarded as noble—works
counter to the middle class conceptions being peddled in increasingly commercial culture, and thus serves as a counter to Sacvan Bercovitch’s contention that nationalist celebration of America is middle class and anti-revolutionary in nature. By bringing this passage into the present tense Lippard rhetorically leaves open the possibility of continued revolution—particularly revolution grounded in a sense of injustice towards one’s class.

While Lippard’s role in the revolution began with print, it would conclude with activism. Through his reform activities Lippard sought to seize the opportunity posed by the revolutionary spirit sweeping Europe and America, and to act upon the optimism that Paine expressed in Common Sense: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday or a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months” (qtd. in Lippard 467).

On July 21, 1849, the Quaker City Weekly featured a notice announcing the organization of a labor group called the Brotherhood of the Union (Reynolds Lippard 19). The Brotherhood, Lippard claimed, would serve as an affirmation of a universal truth “proclaimed in our Revolution, by the book Common Sense, by the Declaration of Independence, and by the men who died for it upon the battle field—attested, re-baptised and re-affirmed by the men of the French Revolution…” (“Goals” 207). “This Truth,” he wrote, “put in the simplest form of speech, reads thus: ‘God the Father of human kind, has decreed that every man upon his earth is entitled to Life, Liberty, Land and Home—to a place to work and to the fruits of his work—to the means of the healthful development of all his
faculties, physical and intellectual—to that right of development, compressed in the simple word Progress’” (208). Thus, the Brotherhood would be a vibrant embodiment of the philosophy guiding Lippard’s fiction.

The launch of the Brotherhood marked the achievement of one of Lippard’s ambitions as well as a moment of transition within his career. Within one year after the announcement, Lippard would give up running his journal and would almost entirely shift his focus from literary endeavors to activism. Between 1850 and his death in 1854, Lippard reigned in his prolific production; his works of this period, in addition to his volume on the life of Paine, include New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million (1853), and one edition of a new labor journal, The White Banner (1851), in which he published portions of a new surrealist historical romance, Adonai, the Pilgrim of Eternity.

Lippard spent his final years organizing and lecturing on behalf of the Brotherhood. These lectures, on historical topics related to the cause of labor, were a new priority but were not a new endeavor for Lippard. Many of the Revolutionary legends that would later comprise the volumes Washington and His Generals and Washington and His Men had been delivered as historical lectures before the William Wirt Institute of Philadelphia and other social groups and historical societies. Lippard delivered his first lecture before the William Wirt Institute—an organization which drew its name from the biographer of Patrick Henry—on December 8, 1845. Lippard later lectured on historical topics as far away from his Philadelphia home as Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia during 1846 and 1847 (Reynolds Lippard 13). Lippard’s popularity as a lecturer further suggests the demand for counter-narratives to the popular history of the Revolution and an understanding of the narrative construction of history.
The link between Lippard’s historical lectures and his reform efforts is solidified in the rituals and philosophy of the Brotherhood. “The Brotherhood of the Union,” Reynolds explains:

was Lippard’s ultimate attempt at bringing together various ideas and reforms that had increasingly preoccupied him since the early 1840s: the ritualism of ancient orders such as the Druids, the Rosicrucians, and the Illuminati; the intense patriotism, without the nativism, of the Masons and the Odd Fellows; the nonsectarian religious tolerance best exemplified by his friend [Charles Chauncy] Burr; and principles of reform, deriving in part from Universalist Socialism, that called for radical revision of the capitalist system. (Lippard 19)

In a sketch of the Brotherhood’s purpose, Lippard identified “Its Method of Work” as “The Combination of all true men into Circles of Brotherhood, scattered throughout the Continent, and held together by a common purpose, and by uniform regalia, rites, ceremonies, and symbols” (“Platform” 209). On a surface level, Lippard’s fiction and his work with the Brotherhood shared a reliance on the symbolism and iconography of the Revolution; in fact, Lippard claimed that the Brotherhood itself was “a re-vivification of a Society which existed in our Revolution” ([Secret Societies] 212). “Its rites, ceremonies, pledges are thoroughly and broadly American,” he continued. “Its ritual (or masonic work) is made up of striking events in American history and in the history of human progress all over the world” (212). Moreover, the structure of the Brotherhood reflected Lippard’s fascination with Revolutionary history. He christened the officer positions of the Brotherhood with the names of Revolutionary heroes, including Jefferson, Franklin, and Wayne. In October 1850, at its first annual convention, Lippard was elected to head the Brotherhood, an honor that garnered him the title “Supreme Washington” (Reynolds Lippard 20-21).

By the time of the first convention, the Brotherhood had become a great success; 142 chapters, or “circles,” had been established in 19 states (Reynolds Lippard 20). George
Henry Evans, writing in *Young America*, the most influential labor journal in the nation, said of the Brotherhood in 1850, “I am inclined strongly to think that the Brotherhood of the Union will be one of the most powerful instrumentalities in restoring the land to the people. The readers of Young America will hear more of it” (qtd. in Lippard [George Henry Evans] 202). Evans’ approving review of the Brotherhood locates Lippard’s organization at the vanguard of the labor movement in America; this was no group on the fringes of the laboring cause. As Evans told his readers, the Brotherhood aligned itself with the goals and structures of the NIC: “it appears to be formed on the model recommended by the Convention which formed the Industrial Congress, its form of organization and its objects being almost identical with that recommendation, its object being to convert the soil of American into Free Homes for all its inhabitants” (qtd. in Lippard [George Henry Evans] 202). Lippard’s speech in 1848 did not mark the totality of the Brotherhood’s involvement with the Industrial Congress; rather, the eighth session of the NIC, convened in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1853, was presided over by a member of the Brotherhood. Moreover, the Brotherhood’s legacy should not be measured solely by its involvement in the NIC; Reynolds asserts that the Brotherhood served as an influential forerunner of and model for the Knights of Labor, the most important labor group of the later nineteenth-century, which was founded in Philadelphia in 1867 (Reynolds Lippard 21).

As Evans’ comments suggest, the main goal of the Brotherhood was to achieve justice for the workingman by means of cooperative effort and land reform legislation. These programs, Lippard believed, held the potential to right the myriad wrongs of American society. The Brotherhood would

destroy this system of special law-making, which borrowed from the Old World, fills our streets with drunkards, our jails with felons, our workshops
with ill-paid and defrauded Laborers—this system of special law making
which divides our land into classes, here the Few rich and favored, there
the Many poor and wretched, robbed of their rights, miserable all their
days, and working to the last hour of life, for just enough to keep body and
soul together. (“Goals” 208)

“How shall we destroy this, and all other evils born of the same breed?” he asked his readers
(208). The answer, Lippard asserted, lay in the principle of combination:

Do you live in the large city? Are you cheated by an Idler who lives in
luxury while you starve? Then combine your Labor, and that Labor will
become Capital. Form a Union with your Brother Workers. Have Faith in
one another. Form workshops and stores on the principle of Combination.
Form associations of every trade that now supplies the world with all that it
needs for its comfort or its luxury….Do not look to others for your
Elevation. Be your own Regenerators, your own Masters, your own Men.
(209)

Lippard played an instrumental role in the establishment of cooperative communities in
Philadelphia. In 1850, for instance, he aided in founding a cooperative of tailoresses in the
city.

Though the rituals of the Brotherhood—which, for example, included a mock drama
of a capitalist conspiracy in which figures representing the “Lords” of Law, Land, and Labor
plot the oppression of American workers—stressed the conflict between capital and labor,
Lippard emphasized that the Brotherhood “will not work by physical violence. It will have
nothing to do with knife, pistol or sword. It will work by the combination of half a million
Hearts, Arms and Minds—to say nothing of the congregated Pennies of Labor, which in the
Society will grow rapidly into Capital” ([Secret Societies] 212).

Lippard owed his interest in cooperative movements to his reading of European
socialist reformers, particularly Louis Blanc and Charles Fourier. That Lippard had always
viewed the cause of labor in international terms is evident by the conclusion of his Liberty
Bell tale and the paths traced by the bell’s echo, which Lippard describes as having “crossed
the Atlantic—pierced the dungeons of Europe—the work-shops of England—the vassal-fields of France” and also as having “spoke[n] to the slave—bade him look from his toil—and know himself a man” (393). Lippard showed great enthusiasm for the European revolutions of 1848; unlike many Americans, however, his enthusiasm stemmed from his support for the socialist principles that drove the uprisings across the continent. “Shall all the world look for the redemption of the workers from the chains of social wrong,” Lippard asked, “and our Union be left hopeless and desolate?” (“Valedictory” 193).

As Larry J. Reynolds explains, Americans initially greeted the revolutions of 1848 with democratic sympathy and generally enjoyed a newly revived spirit of nationalism; however, many turned their backs on their European brethren when they came to understand the radical social character of those rebellions (12). Most Americans, Reynolds reports, “ignored the fact that the [1848 French] revolution was initiated by only a portion of the French populace—the Paris workers—and that these men wanted not just political freedom, but a change in their social condition; not just the vote, but work, an income, and food for themselves and their families—all of which the provisional government promised them” (19). Socialized into a national faith in free enterprise and individual improvement, Americans could only respond to that cause in a reactionary fashion: “Because socialism (in the form of common ownership of property, designed to free men from economic oppression and material want) was so foreign to the experience of most Americans, they failed at first to see the attraction it held for many Frenchmen, and when they did, they reacted with suspicion and fear” (19).

Despite the continued distrust of much of the nation, socialism did have a significant impact on American life and thought during the 1840s and 1850s. The roots of American
socialism are evident in workers’ responses to several economic realities of the period. Some
advocates of socialist policies pointed out that the government’s support for a growing
number of commercial endeavors ranging from banks to railroads belied the laissez-faire
philosophy that supposedly governed the state. The problem with these internal
improvement programs, they argued, was not that the government was involving itself in the
economic life of its citizens, but that the common citizen was not the chief beneficiary of
these programs; as Mark Lause explains, “such policies amounted to making the nation pay
for a restructuring of its economic life and social structure that would be entirely in the hands
of private interests” (91). The central question regarding the government’s economic policy,
these reformers contended, was not whether the government should intervene in the economy
but rather what kind of interventionist force the government should be—“not whether the
government should ‘meddle’ with private property but whether it might sometimes do so on
behalf of the citizens in general” (57).

The members of the NIC, which was an “NRA-socialist collaboration,” believed that
their reform agenda—the goal of which was the elimination of institutionalized advantages
held by the rich and powerful above the mass of workers—could best be achieved through
land reform (Lause 32). Consequently, they proposed further measures such as the abolition
of land seizures to cover debts, a homestead act to allow the landless to settle on public lands,
as well as a series of limits on the amount of land that could be held by any one individual
(Lause 3).

Trades groups and other endeavors informed by socialism offered alternatives when
the right to property—which, as these reformers conceived of it, included the right to one’s
labor—became imperiled by the increasingly pervasive wage labor system. The artisan
tradition of political involvement stretching back to the Revolution was rooted in the workers’ pride in their independent status; now they felt that their independence was being challenged. Their anxiety at the prospect of falling into a state of dependency manifested itself in a number of ways, including racism directed toward African American workers. That anxiety also motivated an increased interest in western territory that many believed could serve as a safety valve, offering plentiful land and profitable labor away from the exploitative wage labor system.

At the conclusion of Washington and His Generals, Lippard pauses to reflect on a new vision “at once sublime and beautiful!” Musing on the exotic history of Mexico, Lippard re-imagines the three tales of conquest that constitute the central “lines” in that nation’s history: the rise of the Aztecs and the “civilized Empire of Montezuma”; the Aztecs’ fall at the hands of Cortes; and, most importantly, the “EMPIRE OF FREEDOM” being established—“even while I write,” Lippard notes—“by the white race of North America, the children of the Revolution and countrymen of Washington….­” (523-24).

This vision comes on the heels of a visit from “one of the disbanded volunteers of Mexico,” a “young man, clad in plain military undress [sic], his pale face, scarred forehead and fiery eye, denoting the ravages of the battle and the fever” (524). Lippard, his table “strewn with the manuscript of Washington and His Generals,” interrupts his work to welcome the young man, who explains that he has come “‘from the field of Monterey, to thank you for myself and my comrades!’” (525). The young man then recalls:

“Your works have cheered the weariness of many a sleepless night. Gathered round our watch-fire before the battle of Monterey, one of our number seated on a cannon, would read while the others listened. Yes, in the Courier we read your Legends of the Revolution! Believe me, sir,
those things made our hearts feel warm—they nerved our arms for the battle! When we read of the old times of our Flag, we swore in our hearts, never to disgrace it!” (525)

As a token of his appreciation, the veteran hands over to the author his only possessions: a knife taken from a fellow soldier killed at Monterey, and “a volume of blotted manuscript” containing, the young man explains, “the record of my wanderings—roughly written—yet the facts of the battles and marches are there” (525). That book, Lippard informs his readers, has become the basis for a new series of legends.

Most straightforwardly, this episode, which reveals Lippard at his jingoistic, self-promoting best, serves as an advertisement for Lippard’s soon-to-be published collection, *Legends of Mexico* (1847). Of greater interest to the literary historian, however, is the manner in which this “vision” hints at the tangled history of Lippard’s Revolutionary legends, particularly their curious circulation and the complex political affiliations that informed their composition and reception.¹⁷

“Shall we not write the traditions of this land?” Lippard asks as he continues his reflections on the legends of Mexico. “Shall we not follow the Banner of the Stars from the bloody heighth of Bunker Hill, from the meadow of Brandywine, to the snow-clad heighth of Orizaba and the golden city of Tenochtitlan?” (523-24). As this passage makes clear, Lippard saw the war against Mexico as a continuation of the campaign of liberty begun with the Americans’ defeat of the British. Lippard was far from unique in claiming that the two wars, separated by some seventy years, were related. The ubiquity of Revolutionary lore in American culture—and the associated angst of younger generations compelled to measure themselves against the accomplishments of their forebears—gave youthful soldiers an opening to proclaim their commitment to the continuing American Revolutionary experiment. “Having been raised on the tales of America’s struggle for independence.”
Robert W. Johannsen explains, “the [Mexican War] volunteers saw themselves as merely continuing the fight, longing to experience ‘in their own persons’ the excitement of the battlefields about which they had only read” (57).¹⁸

Lippard’s support for the Mexican War was rooted in seemingly contradictory impulses: a belief in Manifest Destiny as well as belief in the imperiled state of labor. “God has given the American Continent as the Homestead of redeemed Labor,” he wrote (“Platform” 209). Though Lippard could look into the future and optimistically foresee the entire nation organized into cooperative units, he noted the great potential for the West as a land free from existing restrictions that would impinge on workers’ ability to create a society in accordance with their values. In contrast, workers on the East coast could likely never fully escape the manipulations of capital. Even the Brandywine mechanic, who sets up his home and shop at a distance from civilization, is not safe from the threat of invading capital. In this manner, the Brandywine mechanic again resembles Crevecouer’s American Farmer, who flees among the Indians as a means of escaping the violence of the Revolution.

Lippard’s New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million (1853) closes with perhaps his most complete vision of the potential for the lands in the West in the form of settlement erected in concert with Free Soil doctrine. The romance concludes with a wagon train of “Three hundred emigrants, mechanics, their wives and little ones, who have left the savage civilization of the Atlantic cities, for a free home beyond the Rocky Mountains” (284). This band is led by the mechanic Arthur Demoyne, who Reynolds claims is the first socialist hero in American fiction.* Demoyne’s socialist leanings manifest themselves in his description of his settler band as “‘three hundred serfs…rescued from poverty, from wages-slavery, from
the war of competition, from the grip of the landlord!’” (284). The romance concludes with a prayer:

And let us all, as we survey the masses of the human race, attempting their exodus from thraldom of all kinds,—of the body,—of the soul,—from the tyranny which crushes man by the iron hand of brute force, or slowly kills him by the lawful operation of capital, labor-saving machinery, or monied enterprise,—let us, too, send up our prayer,—“O! Thou of Nazareth, go with the People in their exodus, dwell with them in their tents, beacon with light, their hard way to the Promised Land! (284)

As this passage suggests, Lippard successfully adapted the popular rendering of American history as a providential narrative so as to infuse that narrative with his own egalitarian sentiments.

The extent—and limitations—of Lippard’s egalitarianism can be seen in his attitudes towards slavery. Like many other reformers of the period, Lippard adopted the rhetorical device of conflating chattel slavery with the oppressive acts of capitalists against white laborers; this rhetorical tendency manifests itself in Lippard’s speech to the NIC in which he asserts that homesteads offered the possibility of a “Land…unpolluted by Black or White Slavery” (“Valedictory” 194). As labor historians including David Roediger have made clear, such expressions heightened the rhetorical pitch of assertions of workers’ rights only by eliding the far greater oppression endured by black slaves.* Likewise, historians have expressed justifiable skepticism toward statements like Lippard’s, asserting that the ultimate aim of many agrarian reformers, as well as advocates of Free Soil policy including David Wilmot, was the construction of a “white republic” in the West. 19 Such indictments of latent racism certainly seem merited when one considers that Lippard sometimes attributes to his black characters subhuman characteristics—a common manner of portraying blacks during the period.

96
At the same time, there is ample evidence that reformers including Lippard and members of the Free Soil Party did envision the incorporation of racial minorities including Native Americans and former slaves into American society (Lause 21). Significantly, Lippard incorporated black characters into his Revolutionary narratives. In both Blanche of Brandywine and Washington and His Generals, Lippard tells the story of Black Sampson, a former slave who joins the Continental cause at the battle of Brandywine. As depicted by Lippard, Sampson’s common cause with his fellow revolutionary soldiers is his identity as a worker, as well as a victim of British brutality. In both texts, Sampson’s story parallels that of other aggrieved workers. In Blanche of Brandywine, Sampson is identified as one of the “Oath Bound Five,” a group of workers who collectively commit themselves to aiding the revolutionary cause. In Washington and His Generals, Lippard, through the structure of their tales and the description of their participation in the battle, draws parallels between Sampson and the anonymous mechanic who wields his hammer in the fight. Black Sampson, armed with a scythe and accompanied by his loyal dog, Devil, terrorizes the British throughout the battle and is transfigured as he fights in defense of his rights:

At last, yonder on the banks of the Brandywine, where a gush of sunlight pours through the battle-clouds, you see Black Sampson stand. A strange change has passed over himself, his scythe, his dog. All have changed color. The color they wear is a fiery red – look! You can see it drip from the scythe, crimson Sampson’s chest and arms, and stain with gory patches, the white fur of his dog. (367)

As in his depiction of the mechanic, Lippard describes Sampson’s contributions to the revolutionary cause in graphic yet laudatory terms; he also manipulates the verb tense of the narrative to suggest the laborer’s involvement in a continuing class struggle. Sampson’s status as an escaped slave—he enters the battle after the white farmer who has harbored him is killed through the deceitful machinations of the Tory Gilbert Gates—further suggests the
extent of Lippard’s opposition to slavery. His vocal resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law—which became the motivating force behind his short story “Eleanor; or, Slave Catching in Philadelphia” (1854)—produced considerable controversy in his native city (Reynolds Lippard 24, 60).

As the congressional debate over the Wilmot Proviso revealed, advocates on both sides of the issue worried how the annexation of lands won in the Mexican War would affect the future of slavery in the United States: if it would, as some Free Soilers hoped, lead to the eventual eradication of slavery in the nation, or, as eventually became the case following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, restrictions on the spread of slavery would be lifted in favor of state control over the institution. Fearing that any lands claimed through the war would become corrupted by the slave system, abolitionists became the most vocal constituency within the war opposition.

Among Lippard’s comrades in the labor movement were other outspoken critics of the war. These activists were skeptical that the new western lands would ever come into the possession of workingmen; rather, they would likely be retained by the rich, who were equally likely to plant the seed of chattel slavery there. Compounding the tragedy of the southern conquest was the fact that its gains were being made on the backs of the workers who filled the ranks of the United States army. The activist Elizur Wright decried the campaign as “a war not only against Mexico, but against justice, climate, and God-Almighty”; the prospect of American soldiers “suffering more terrible than those of ‘Valley Forge’ in the cause of human oppression,” he wrote, “is too horrible to be thought of” (qtd. in Lause 76). Others asserted that the war was merely proving a point previously made by another workers’ rights advocate: “As society is constituted, working men are but weapons,
mechanized automatons, in the hands of others” (qtd. in Lause 55). Though Lippard wholeheartedly supported the war while it played out, he ironically gave voice to the concerns of the war critics when he wrote, “These Money Jobbers (divided into speculators, bill brokers, brokers and mortgage holders) would sanction any war for a rise in stocks or damn any enterprise—even the holiest—for a good per centage upon their paper” ([Workers’ Revolt] 218).

Even as Lippard spoke out more strenuously against the Fugitive Slave Law and declared his intentions to “paint the enormities of Black Slavery—and show it to all the world, the wretched and enormous Wrong that it is,” his faith in the American brotherhood, forged through the heroic labor of the Revolution, was so great that he would not forswear his allegiance to those on the other side the slavery issue. As was his habit, Lippard viewed the great wrong of slavery in systemic terms, and emphasized the need for systemic change rather than simply denounce the villainy of slaveholders. “[L]et us not forget,” he wrote, “that the Slaveholder is as much the victim of circumstances, as he is the doer of willful iniquity—that he is an American—a man of the great family of this Union—a Brother!” (“Valedictory” 194).

Following the conclusion of the war—and, significantly, subsequent to the closure of the Parisian workshops and Zachary Taylor’s repudiation of the European revolutions—Lippard’s optimism regarding what had been accomplished in Mexico diminished. His fictional narrative of the Western homesteads, Bel of Prarie Eden: a Romance of Mexico (1848), announced his fear that among the settlers claiming land in the territories would be not only humble workers but also capitalists eluding the consequences of their exploitative
practices in the East. Most of all, Lippard lamented the disappearance of the spirit of brotherhood that had once characterized relations between the nation’s various regions. In a letter of March 2, 1850, he announced to Lawrence Badger, the editor of the *Hornet’s Nest* of Charlotte, North Carolina, that he had given up hope for the preservation of the Union.

“Dear Lawrence,” he wrote:

> When we visited the old battle ground of Red Bank together, last summer, I made you a promise that I would write for your paper, a Legend of the Revolution, founded upon the history of the Carolinas. I have not fulfilled my promise. I am sorry to say, that I cannot fulfill it now. A Legend of the Revolution would be fraught with reverence for the American Union. What is the use of writing about a Thing which, judging from the speeches in Congress, the tone of the press, and the resolutions of State Legislatures, no longer exists? ([Letter] 163)

To be sure, Lippard’s letter was suffused with disdain for the editors who poisoned relations within the country through their posturing; yet the violence that he saw ensuing from the regional conflict was deadly serious. “Do you not live in the South?,” he rhetorically asked Badger. “Do I not live in the North? Let us hate one another, Lawrence, so that we will have nerve to cut one another’s throats when the good time comes” (165).

Even as Lippard envisioned the fallout of civil war, he could not completely surrender his optimism for the cause of reform. “[T]he Workers of the North,” he mused, “may choose to do a little for themselves, while they are fighting for their Masters; and the Slaves of the South may grow unruly, and—but do you remember the history of the wars of the French League? Do you call to mind the joyous days of the French Revolution? Do you think of St. Domingo?” (165). As the fracturing of this sentence suggests, Lippard could not repress his hope for a transformative revolution. “Disunion will not stop with Mason & Dixon’s line,” he prognosticated. “It will not stop until it has arrayed every Worker in the Northern States, against the Employer; and every Slave in the South against his Master’s throat” (165).
Though the clash would be catastrophic, Lippard did not discount the possibility that both slaves and laborers could achieve just be adopting of the “Gospel of the Rifle.”

Though the letter to Badger reflects some remnant of optimism, an editorial in the Quaker City Weekly written just some two weeks prior reveals that Lippard feared northern and southern elites’ willingness to engineer a civil war as a means dividing the ranks of labor. “Shall these Idlers”—the aforementioned “factory Prince” of the North and the “cotton Lord” of the South

set you, Workers, to cutting each other’s throats? Shall the Worker of Pennsylvania be forced to array himself in Murder against the Worker of South Carolina? Shall the Man who in Ohio works for his bread be arrayed against the Man in Kentucky who also works for his bread?….Disunion only means this—the Poor Men of one State shall cut the throats of the Poor Men of some other State. To war it must come, and you will be expected to fight the battle, even as some of your brother workers fought the battles of Mexico. ([Workers’ Civil War] 167)

Though this statement retains some measure of ambiguity, it is possible that this moment marks Lippard’s concession that the Mexican War—won through the sacrifice of working men—had not empowered laborers but instead sealed their fate as sacrifices in the oncoming war.

Lippard was not yet willing to concede that war was inevitable. “Remember,” he cautioned his readers; “a civil war cannot be carried on unless the Workers of North and South sign the Bill which declares that War” (167). “Workers in the North and South, without whose labor society could not exist one hour,” he invoked them, “you do not think of being made the tools and murder-machines of these Lords of Land and Lords of Labor?” (167). As an activist, Lippard had committed himself to transforming the workingman’s condition from that of “human machinery” to that of a citizen who could be (to paraphrase)
his own Regenerator, his own Master, his own Man. Consequently, he implored his readers to fight only upon their own terms:

Don’t fight for the Rich Man’s Land, or for the Landlord’s Rights. Let them do their own fighting. Fight for a bit of land for yourselves, if fight you must. …Let every Worker from California to Maine solemnly resolve that if Disunion must come, why then he, even the Man who works, will fight for himself, for his brethren, or not at all. (167)

Secession was still over five years away when Lippard succumbed to tuberculosis just shy his thirty-second birthday. Nevertheless, his prophecies regarding the Civil War and its devastating effect upon the laboring classes held true. Furthermore, his prediction regarding the inability of Revolutionary legends to effect the preservation of the Union or bring about substantive social change in the midst of the sectional conflict likewise proved accurate; as he had told Badger, a legend celebrating the Union was meaningless in that context because slavery had driven a wedge between North and South and such divisions within the Union prevented any sort of concerted effort to address the other social issues that had commanded Lippard’s attention. Shortly after Lippard’s death, a foolhardy Herman Melville would compose his own Revolutionary romance with hopes for commercial success and a continuation of the democratic narrative of the workingman’s share in revolution. He would fail in both regards. It would fall to the abolitionists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass to adapt the Revolutionary narrative into a new form that would capitalize upon its liberating potential.

A further unintended consequence of Lippard’s support for the Mexican War had to do with the potentialities for the Revolutionary narratives that he succeeded in bringing to a new level of popularity. Through the Revolutionary sketches and tales found in Washington and His Generals, Lippard simultaneously applauded the cause of labor as well as the Mexican conquest—two endeavors that he deemed inextricably linked. Upon the conclusion
of the war, however, advocates of labor found that slavery, rather than labor or socialist reform, had become the issue regarding which invocations of the Revolution became most appropriate and powerful. As we shall explore in the final chapter, opponents of slavery including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass adapted and harnessed the rhetorical force of the Revolutionary narrative as a means of advocating abolition in the years prior to the outbreak of civil war. If, as pundits both before and since have claimed, that war was to be a second American Revolution, it would be a revolution dedicated to the eradication of chattel slavery. It would not fulfill Lippard’s revolutionary dream of reconstituting society in accordance with the principles of Brotherhood.
Eric Foner asserts that the crowd activity of the Revolutionary era is best deemed “pre-political” in the sense that such activity was generally a reflexive response to injustice or was engineered by elites for their own purposes. See Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 53-54, 62. At the same time, it is important not to discount the extent to which supposedly disorganized “mob” actions were in fact ordered and led by lower and working class figures. Moreover, political action among urban workers during the 1830s partly entailed the reclaiming of Revolutionary actions from elite control. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, laborers in the industrial centers of the Northeast proudly celebrated those workers who had lit the fuse of rebellion. In Boston, for instance, the mid-1830s saw the working class reclaim the “Tea Party” (formerly described in staid fashion by cultural leaders as “the destruction of the tea”) as a foundational moment in American independence, one fueled by the efforts of laborers like themselves. See Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*.

Among these groups were the Democratic-Republican societies and the Philadelphia Working Men’s Party, which challenged the increasing subdivision of labor as a threat to their economic and political independence (Wilentz *Rise* 282). The Working Men’s Party and other Philadelphia city democrats were among the earliest supporters of Andrew Jackson’s presidential aspirations (Wilentz *Rise* 245).

As David Reynolds explains, Lippard sought assurance from Taylor that he would be “‘the candidate, not of a party’ but ‘of the whole people’” (Lippard 17). Taylor’s one-sentence reply was apparently sufficient for Lippard, though, as Reynolds reports, “after an interview with the new president [in March 1849]…[he] felt deeply betrayed, for Taylor was surrounding himself with Whig politicians and aspersing the European revolutionaries” (17).

In addition to the two collections of Revolutionary legends, Lippard’s romances of the American Revolution include *Herbert Tracy; or, Legend of the Black Rangers. A Romance of the Battle-field of Germantown* (1844); *Blanche of Brandywine* (1846), and *The Rose of Wissahikon; or, the Fourth of Jully, 1776. A Romance, Embracing the Secret History of the Declaration of Independence* (1847).

Lippard filled his fiction with sex and gore—and sometimes fused the two in gruesome fashion by hinting at necrophilia. See Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 220-221.

That Poe also approved of Lippard’s work to some degree is evident by letter of approbation included in collected edition of Lippard’s *Herbert Tracy* in 1844 (Reynolds *Lippard* 9).

Subsequent—and slightly altered—versions appeared in the *Courier* and in Lippard’s Revolutionary romance *The Rose of Wissahikon* (1847). Like many of the legends published in the *Courier*, the Liberty Bell legend was also collected in *Washington and His Generals*. For changes between original and subsequent versions, see Reynolds *Lippard* 65-66.


Lippard quite effectively harnesses the symbolic force of Washington, a force Lippard acknowledges when he proclaims that Washington “is not dead! For he will never die! For he lives – lives at this hour, in a fuller and bolder life than ever” (114). Lippard associates Washington’s continued resonance in the American psyche with his endurance during the harsh days at Valley Forge: “The name of Washington,” Lippard claims, “is that eternal fire built in every American heart, and burning on when the night is darkest, and blazing brightest when the gloom is most terrible” (115). Washington’s remarkable ability to keep faith in the face of daunting obstacles inspires Lippard to draw comparisons between Washington and Christ. First, Lippard’s Washington serves as a model of republican virtue and self-sacrifice in the mold of Christ: as he mulls the rightness of his cause and prepares to enter into the field of battle, Washington “falls on his knees, he prays the God of Heaven to take his life, as an offering for the freedom of his native land!” (108). Washington’s anguish in these deliberations elicit a further comparison to “that dark night in Gethsemane, when the blood-drops startled [sic]
from the brow of Jesus, the Blessed Redeemer, as he plead for the salvation of the world!” (108). Lippard illustrates the need of reform in the church and among the insincere elite when he imagines a scene in which Washington is captured and brought to England to be executed. While standing on the scaffold awaiting his fate, Washington is approached by a priest who “begs that calm-faced traitor to repent of his treason before he dies, – to be reconciled to his King, the good King George; to repent of his wicked deeds at Trenton, Monmouth, Germantown, Brandywine, and Valley Forge” (WG 113-114). “[L]ook,” Lippard begs his audience; see “how that noble-looking rebel pushes him aside with a quiet scorn,” then, “with one prayer to God, with one thought of his country,” lays his head on the chopping block (114). Lippard’s visions of Washington’s execution also evoke abolitionists’ frequent claims that, had Washington failed, he would have met with the same fate as the foiled slave rebels.

10 As Edward Widmer suggests in Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York, the more democratic conceptions of American culture budding during this period posed a challenge to the existing balance of cultural power, which tilted decidedly toward New England; Young America’s mission was to some extent “an ethnic protest, striving to replace New England’s emphasis on Anglo-Saxon and Puritan traditions with a more universal belief in the openness and variety of the American experience” (11).

11 According to Reynolds, Lippard’s fiction inspired numerous pilgrimages to Revolutionary sites, and, “As recently as 1919 historians were still digging up turf in the Brandywine area searching for the remains of Lord Percy of Monthermer, unaware that Percy was merely a creation of Lippard’s fancy” (Lippard 71-72).

12 The cheap books, penny papers, and other popular formats in whose pages Lippard’s works appeared particularly flourished at times when more conventional and conservative publishing endeavors proved most problematic, as in the wake of financial panics. The sensationalistic plots and trappings of such texts have led many to deem them mere opiates for the masses and distractions amidst hard times. Scholars oriented to the processes of production of such popular texts, particularly Michael Denning, have labored to recover the ambiguous interplay between the impersonality of their production (Denning refers to dime novels as being compositions of an “unauthored discourse”) and the embodiment within those texts of a working class consciousness. Denning advocates viewing popular works as “contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict where signs with wide appeal and resonance take on contradictory disguises and are spoken in contradictory accents” (3). At the same time, Denning acknowledges that in the hands of a literary entrepreneur like Lippard, such cheap works could become vehicles for dissent (87).

13 Lippard laments that Luther did not go far enough toward erasing the institutional advantages of the powerful; rather, Lippard saw Luther as “a noble man of genius, who had not the courage to go the whole way,--to declare the right of every man to Land and Home in this world, as well as to Hope in the next…” (101).

14 Though seemingly replete with sinful acts, Lippard’s fictions were also populated by “perverse characters…who function affirmatively” (Reynolds Lippard 81). David Reynolds reads Lippard’s city fiction, and the character of Devil-Bug in particular, as “an updated version of the Puritan Calvinist belief that salvation results from a total awareness of depravity” (“Introduction” xl). While the allure of sin is real for Lippard and his novels are full of characters consumed by sinfulness, he does reshape the Puritan paradigm in that, as Reynolds explains, “the depravity Devil-Bug witnesses has a profoundly social dimension reflective of Lippard’s radical views” (“Introduction” xl).

15 This explanation of separate spheres is of necessity an oversimplification and must be qualified by an acknowledgment of the important and legitimate psychological implications of domestic ideology, which, as Lora Romero explains in Home Fronts, employs “the home as a metaphor for interiority (in the sense of ‘selfhood’)” as a means of “re-defin[ing] woman’s value in terms of internal qualities: sound judgment, knowledge of how to run a household, moral tendencies—qualifications that suited a woman to be a good wife and mother rather than merely making her satisfying to the male gaze” (21). Additionally, critics such as Jane Tompkins have effectively argued that women authors employed domestic ideology as a tool of subversion, a point that Romero expands upon by considering the workings of domesticity within social reform movements. Furthermore, critics including Amy Kaplan have contested the notion that there ever existed truly separate, gender-demarcated spheres. My intention in making reference to the notion of separate spheres is not to argue
for its veracity or practicability, but rather to illustrate the idea to which Lippard responded, and in the terms Lippard used, in his criticism and sensational fictions. Though several of Lippard’s female characters evidence a deeper psychology and a greater degree of agency than are conventionally found in nineteenth-century fiction, and despite the fact that he campaigned for the rights of female workers, Lippard did not have the issue of female agency foremost in his mind when he composed the majority of his fiction.

In regard to the social function of the historical romance that I am tracing through this dissertation, it is worth noting how the construction of a feminine domestic sphere was, in effect, an effort to extend the Revolutionary-era ideology of republican motherhood. As Romero explains, whereas proponents of republican motherhood “attempted to incorporate women into the ongoing Revolutionary project by representing men and women as equally (but differently) capable of contributing to the moral well-being of the Republic, early-nineteenth-century writers increasingly enunciated womanhood as the sole repository of national value” (15).

16 See also Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, 169-170.

17 In addition to serving as advertisement, this scenario also enabled Lippard to accuse other writers of plagiarism and to defend himself from attacks of manipulating history. In a footnote to this scene, Lippard notes: “it may be well to inform the reader, that another work by the title of ‘Washington and His Generals,’ has been published by New York book-sellers, its title and whole pages of description pilfered from mine” (527). By offering the tale of the soldier’s gift of his battlefield journal, Lippard also appears to go on the offensive in answering attacks on the volume’s veracity; the journal—or even the hint that such a source exists—provides Lippard with the illusion of unquestionable authenticity for his tales.

18 This duality gave rise to the temporal confusion evident in the slogans through which they invoked their radical forebears: “The Revolution to be fought again!”; “The work of ’76 to be finished!”; “The American Revolution is yet in progress” (qtd. in Lause 50).

19 Shelly Streby’s rich treatment of Legends of Mexico elucidates the manner in which Lippard uses his fiction to construct the contours of American identity in such a way as to justify the imperialist war with Mexico and to incorporate new racial and ethnic groups into the nation. See Streby, American Sensations 38-77.
In a diary entry dated October 5, 1847, Evert Duyckinck wrote:

The Historical Society tonight unearthed a characteristic letter from Gen Washington to a friend, dated New York 5th November 1782, commissioning a pair of leather breeches with the particular injunction “I shall thank you for reiterating my request that they be made roomy in the seat.” As CM says this was in keeping with the American statesman’s idea of enlarging the area of freedom. (qtd. in Mansfield 411)

Beneath its undercurrent of absurdity, Duyckinck’s diary entry manifests a tension sown widespread within the culture regarding the proper degree of familiarity that should exist between the American people and the Founding Fathers; moreover, it implicitly questions what sort of qualities should be considered “characteristic” of the founding generation.

Duyckinck does not resolve these issues in his diary; rather, he and his compatriots appear to savor the ironic state of affairs in which the New York Historical Society, one of the most established of the state historical societies, would deign to study so mundane a topic as the method by which George Washington procured his pants. Washington is at once a figure both familiar and beyond familiarity; by meditating upon his physical person (and the expansiveness of his posterior) rather than his mythic exploits (popularized by works including Weems’ Life, and generally considered the proper realm of historical study) the members of the Society gently humanize Washington while also dragging him into the realm
of the undignified. By recording this exercise in bathos in his diary, Duyckinck both undercuts, and implicates himself in, the apotheosis of Washington.

Duyckinck’s irreverence on this occasion echoes his calls for the emergence of American political satire—an invocation generally obscured in critical treatments of his role in championing a domestic literary culture. In 1840, Duyckinck wrote, “the two most important desiderata for our country, are a great poet and a great humorous writer” (qtd. in Widmer 97). Duyckinck’s choice for national humorist was Cornelius Mathews, the “CM” of the entry quoted above, who, by drawing parallels between Washington’s garments and his political principles, calls into question the nature or extent of American “freedom.”

Another collaborator in the satire project was Herman Melville—though the nature of Melville’s partnership with the Young America group remained vexed. Nonetheless, Duyckinck claims Melville as a compatriot when, continuing his diary entry on Washington’s pants, he writes, “The letter reminds one of Herman Melville’s Old Zach Epistles in Yankee Doodle…” (qtd. in Mansfield 411).

The pieces attributed to Melville, titled “Authentic Anecdotes of ‘Old Zack,’” appeared in Yankee Doodle in seven installments between July 24th and September 11th of 1847. Yankee Doodle was a short-lived humor magazine helmed by Mathews and based in New York. The magazine’s failure continued Mathews’ string of failed literary endeavors; as would befall Melville, Mathews gained an unshakable reputation for what were deemed perverse literary projects, most notably his novel Behemoth (1839), a work dedicated to Native American themes and which included a fight scene between a man and a mastodon.1 Nevertheless, Duyckinck encouraged Mathews to spearhead the effort to promote political satire and to use Yankee Doodle as his chief mouthpiece; as Duyckinck explained, the
fervent party politics of the period produced ample fodder for satire: “The subject of political life is well-chosen for illustration; its capacity for mirth, its openness to ridicule, are perceived by the most implicit follower at the heels of the best crowd-compelling politician” (qtd. in Widmer 97).

Melville’s “Anecdotes” took as their target the chief “crowd-compelling politician” of the day: General Zachary Taylor, the commander of American troops during the Mexican War. Taylor achieved frontrunner status leading up to the presidential election of 1848 despite his longstanding reluctance to declare—or to disavow—his candidacy, and his even more stubborn refusal to declare openly his political views. (Taylor’s one-sentence response to Lippard’s letter was quite in keeping with this policy.) “At the present time,” Melville writes by way of introduction, “when everything connected with the homespun old hero is perused with unusual interest, and unprincipled paragraphists daily perpetrate the most absurd stories wherewith to titillate public curiosity concerning him, YANKEE DOODLE has thought that a few authentic anecdotes may not be unacceptable to his numerous readers” (212).

Like Duyckinck’s diary entry, this passage is riddled with irony. Chiefly at issue is authenticity. The central joke of the series was that the preposterous tales contained therein were to be more “authentic” than those “absurd stories” that proliferated in the press. Melville takes these assertions of authenticity to absurd lengths, claiming that Yankee Doodle has obtained from Taylor “a written certificate…asserting our columns to be the only true source where an anxious public can procure a correct insight into his private life and little personal peculiarities” (213). The audience’s willingness to participate in the deceptions perpetrated by the press mirrors the marketplace of deception exhibited in P.T.
Barnum’s American Museum, which, like the Yankee Doodle offices, serves as a secondary setting for these sketches. Taylor’s certificate of authenticity, Melville asserts, has been “placed in a brass frame cast from a captured Mexican forty-two brass shot. It occupies a conspicuous place in our office, where it may be seen from 9 A.M. till 3 1-2 P.M. every day, Sundays excepted” (213). In this instance, Melville parrots the rhetoric Barnum employed in attracting audiences to the American Museum: he advertises the display of the certificate, invites his audience to share in the process of interrogating the authenticity of the document, and assures that audience of the respectability of the amusement by reciting the hours of operation (“Sundays excepted”). Barnum himself becomes a secondary character in the Anecdotes; his representatives dog Taylor’s every step through the camps and battlefields of the Mexican front, eager to snatch up any artifact that may merit display at the Museum.

The Anecdotes follow a simple formula. First, they provide accounts of Taylor’s “personal peculiarities,” such as his habit of “violently slapping his person when excited” (215). An artist’s representation of the “Simplicity of Old Zack’s Habits” that accompanies the sketches depicts a corpulent Taylor sitting in his tent and mending the worn seat of his trousers—an image that inspired Duyckinck to connect the Anecdotes to the Washington letter. Taylor’s “homespun” simplicity produces acts of inadvertent courage. In his first anecdote from “the seat of the war,” Melville’s correspondent provides a tongue-in-cheek account of one such act. While Taylor views the action at Buena Vista, a Mexican shell rolls beneath his mount. As his subordinates scatter, Taylor calmly dismounts, grasps the shell, and, “taking it between his fore finger and thumb, drew forth the fusee and waving it toward his aghast officers, quietly observed that if any of them had a cigar to smoke he could supply them with a light” (215). Finally, Melville mocks Barnum’s efforts to commemorate all
aspects of the war in the Museum; he notes, for instance, that Barnum has commanded an
acquaintance of his with the army “to institute a diligent search for the above mentioned
shell—pack up carefully in cotton and send it on for his Museum with all possible dispatch.”
The reporter continues: “Thinking, however, that the search might not prove effectual, Mr.
BARNUM has given orders for a shell of the proper dimensions to be cast at one of the
foundaries up town. We feel confident,” the account sarcastically concludes, “in stating that
the latter will not be exhibited for the genuine article, unless the genuine article fails to come
to hand” (215).

Following another anecdote illustrating Taylor’s insensibility to pain—during which
Taylor rides throughout a day’s worth of battle with a tack protruding from his saddle, and
only discovers the tack when, while dismounting, he rips the seat of his pants—the
correspondent crows about the possibility that the “public may…soon [be] having a peep at
the inexpressibles in which Old Zach has so often cased his valiant legs!” (218). In
anticipation of the exhibit, the staff of Yankee Doodle then “forwarded to BARNUM the
following draught of a placard for the occasion”—the first three lines of which read:
“PRODIGIOUS EXCITEMENT!!!!!! / OLD ZACH’S PANTS!!! / GREAT SIGHTS AT
THE AMERICAN MUSEUM!!!” (218). By the final anecdote, Barnum is attempting to
recruit Taylor himself to appear in the exhibit, “‘a different and highly honorable service’”;
Barnum, his agent writes, promises Taylor that he “‘will treat you no worse than he has the
venerable nurse of our beloved Washington and the illustrious General Tom Thumb’”(225).

Barnum’s amusements served to bring together a variety of fads within popular
culture; for example, James Cook characterizes Barnum’s exhibition of Joice Heth (”the
venerable nurse of our beloved Washington”) as “a quintessentially antebellum mixture of
pseudo-scientific analysis, racist gawking, energetic patriotism, and pious musical entertainment” (5). With the exception of music, Melville’s “Anecdotes” deploy each of these devices or rhetorics in service of their satire. Of even greater interest for Melville is the manner in which Barnum performs acts of deception at his Museum. As Cook explains, Barnum’s exhibitions “involved a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public expose and momentary suspension of disbelief”; by simultaneously playing upon “illusionism and realism,” Barnum instituted “a more slippery mode of new middle-class play—a play whose moral ambiguity and epistemological flexibility were always built into the larger process.” (17, 19, 28). Though Melville proves willing to denounce Barnum as a fabricator, the “Anecdotes” also manifest the beginnings of what would become in his later fiction an almost morbid fascination with the magnitude and methods of deception perpetrated in American culture.

Though Melville mocks Barnum in these sketches, he insinuates that Taylor’s deceptions are more pernicious. Taylor, somewhat akin to Barnum, appears motivated largely by a shameless pursuit of fame. Concerned that the American victory may appear too easy, Taylor writes a letter of condolence to the Mexican commander, Santa Anna, beginning: “My dear Sir, I beseech you, for your own sake, as well as mine, that the next time you come to sup on cannon balls, that you will stand up to it like a man, and not bolt two or three and then precipitately leave the table” (223). When asked by a Yankee Doodle correspondent for copy of the letter, Taylor refuses; however, when begged to “consider the duty you owe to history—to the world—to your own reputation—” he reconsiders. Melville also condemns Taylor’s reticence in regard to his political beliefs. Once again won over by an opportunity to add to his reputation, Taylor writes directly to Yankee Doodle:
I saw that you wish to know my principles! I don’t like to commit myself positively; but as a printer, and I’m a sort of printer myself, having often made a strong impression—you will understand what I say. I shall always endeavor to support the—

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Once again, on a surface level, Melville casts Taylor as a simpleton; his nonverbal response exemplifies his inability or unwillingness to positively declare his views. Taylor’s political platform, as well as his popular appeal, seems to rest in an unreflective patriotism.

Yet Melville’s depiction of Taylor contains a more profound denunciation of American nationalism that fully reveals itself when one considers the climate in which the “Anecdotes” appeared. Melville’s contributions to Yankee Doodle reflected one aspect of his ties to the Young America movement. His essay, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” published in The Literary World, provided a fervent statement of literary nationalism in keeping with the Young Americans’ declarations of independence from the topics and trappings of European, and particularly English, art. Melville also shared a family connection to the political arm of the Young America cohort; his brother, Gansevoort, was a prominent New York Democrat and campaigner for Polk (and who was responsible for providing Polk with his “Young Hickory” nickname). As a member of the legation sent by Polk in 1845, Gansevoort Melville brought with him to England the manuscript of Typee, a novel linked by critics to the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny (Widmer 87-88).
Herman Melville expressed greater ambivalence regarding Polk’s dubious rationale for war than did his brother. In May of 1846, Herman—unaware that his brother had died some three weeks prior—wrote to Gansevoort in England:

People here are all in a state of delirium about the Mexican War….Nothing is talked of but the “Halls of the Montezumas” And to hear folks prate about those purely figurative apartments one would suppose they were another Versailles where our democratic rabble meant to “make a night of it” ere long…. But seriously something great is impending. The Mexican War (tho’ our troops have behaved right well) is nothing of itself—but “a little spark kindleth a great fire” as the well known author of the Proverbs very justly remarks—and who knows what all this may lead to— (Correspondence 40-41)

Though Melville’s anecdotes unmask the apparent naiveté behind Lippard’s support for Taylor, his letter to his brother reveals that he retained some measure of hope that “something great” could emerge from this period of volatility. Significantly, he views the possibility of “impending” change in a transatlantic context; however, rather than trust that Americans could become infected with the revolutionary spirit sweeping France and other European nations, he considers what the American conquest of Mexico will mean for the nation’s relationship with the other major imperial power, Britain.

Will it breed a rupture with England? Or any other great powers?—Prithee, are there any notable battles in store—any Yankee Waterloos?—Or think once of a mighty Yankee fleet coming to the war shock in the middle of the Atlantic with an English one.—Lord, that day is at hand, when we will all be able to talk of our killed & wounded like some of the old Eastern conquerors reckoning them up by thousands;—when the Battle of Monmouth will be thought child’s play—and canes made out of the Constitution’s timbers be thought no more than bamboos. (41)

Significantly, even at the moment when many Americans were proclaiming America’s great achievement in the Mexican campaign, Melville was imagining his nation’s destruction at “Yankee Waterloos…in the middle of the Atlantic.” That destruction would be effected through military might upon the seas—the power that made possible imperial conquest—
with the end of furthering England’s mercantile dominance, and transforming “the
Constitution’s timbers” into “canes” and other commodities. America’s defeat would reverse
the result of the War of 1812, during which the USS Constitution, “Old Ironsides,” offered
legendary service, or—reading a bit more broadly—would undo the American rule of law
established following the separation from Britain. Regardless of the outcome, Melville
viewed America’s future as being inextricably linked to England and to the nations’ twin
commitments to imperialist and capitalist expansion.

Given this dour view, the “Anecdotes” assume more sinister tones. Could anything
“great” ensue from the situation Melville describes in these sketches? The democratic
process seems a shambles, undermined by cagey politicians and a sensational press.
Moreover, Taylor’s scribbled image of the flag, intended as a declaration of principles,
instead evokes the range of deceptions perpetrated under the guise of the flag, from
“Manifest Destiny” to, soon enough, “Popular Sovereignty”—supposed principles that
instead justified the exploitation and enslavement of other human beings. Melville’s visions
of destruction at the hands of the British in his letter to Gansevoort beg the question of what,
if anything, Americans have gained as a result of their separation from that empire. Some
seven years later he would provide his answer.

As Alfred F. Young writes, “Disguise was in the air in the Revolutionary era”
(Masquerade 90). Blackened faces and Indian dress—and, in the cases of women who
wished to serve militarily, soldiers’ uniforms—enabled revolutionary action; such
masquerades “revealed the contingency of social order itself and thus opened up the door for
the creation of the new” (90). Romances of the American Revolution from the antebellum
period often emphasized the subversive capabilities of disguise; works such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821) and Catharine Sedgwick’s *The Linwoods* (1835) include episodes in which characters destabilize hierarchies of class, gender, and race through covert dealing, cross-dressing, and adopting other masks.

At the same time, disguises drew upon and perpetuated stereotypes, added to the uncertainty of an emotionally fraught conflict, and enabled deceptions inspired by less noble motives. These troubling aspects of America’s Revolutionary history were not lost on Cooper, who, despite making a spy, Harvey Birch, the hero of his first Revolutionary romance, expressed ambivalence about the practice of espionage. Cooper particularly fretted about the disconnect between the founding ideals of the nation—that government should be open and honest—and the role of spying and secrecy in securing independence.

Cooper’s romance of the “neutral ground” between British and colonial lines in lower New York reflects the complexity of a social struggle that resisted dichotomous readings; combatants’ allegiances and actions transcended the categories of “patriot” or “loyalist” and sparked a civil war in which “the law was momentarily extinct…and justice was administered subject to the bias of personal interests and the passions of the strongest” (1: 23). Though Cooper largely elides particular strains of class and racial tensions that comprise “the multiple agendas…that sprang from [the] highly diverse and fragmented character” of the Revolution, he successfully captures the particularly opaque drama of political affiliation in New York, in which bandits of unknown principles complicate the cast of characters alongside those who openly declare their allegiances and those who wish to remain neutral (Nash xvi).
Cooper’s concerns about the practice of masquerade are not confined to the Revolutionary period. The deceptions at the heart of the Revolutionary contest, Cooper asserts, have indelibly shaped the memory of the conflict. “Great numbers…wore masks, which even to this day have not been thrown aside,” he writes. The consequences of these masquerades are that

…many an individual has gone down to the tomb, stigmatized as a foe of the rights of his countrymen, while, in secret, he has been the useful agent of the leaders of the revolution; and, on the other hand, could the hidden repositories of divers flaming patriots have been opened to the light of day, royal protections would have been discovered, concealed under piles of British gold. (1:2)

In leading his readers to a deeper examination of the war for independence, Cooper suggests a reexamination of who truly qualifies as a “patriot” of the Revolution and who would best be described as “a foe of the rights of his countrymen” in that conflict; moreover, he suggests that the same level of scrutiny be applied to American society of the 1820s. As he soberly comments toward the conclusion of the novel, “The time must arrive when America will learn to distinguish between a patriot and a robber” (2:109). For Cooper, the ability to distinguish between patriots and robbers was a necessity for Americans as they navigated the two main challenges of the early nineteenth century: adapting to the emerging market economy, and defining the nation’s political identity through the inscription of its Revolutionary history and its law.

In the quarter-century following the publication of The Spy, the romance of the American Revolution emerged as a prolific and popular genre of fiction and a form that could be used to advance any number of political agendas. Though authors sometimes advocated sharp departures from traditional policies and principles in their romances, they generally assumed a reverential stance toward their historical setting and the famous figures
that pop up within their pages; even George Lippard, whose Revolutionary fictions disseminated his visions of a socialist republic, still retained George Washington and other legendary founders as heroic figures in those fictions. Such works noticeably lacked the deep ambivalence regarding the events and outcomes of the Revolution that characterized Cooper’s romances such as *The Spy* and *Lionel Lincoln* (1825).

Over thirty years after the publication of *The Spy*, and three years after Cooper’s death in 1851, Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter; His Fifty Years of Exile* began its serial publication in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*. *Israel Potter* hearkens back to Cooper’s romances in many ways; in a narrative saturated with irony, Melville darkly satirizes the deceptions perpetrated in the name of patriotism and profit during the Revolutionary era. By re-contextualizing the key figures and famous moments of the war, Melville turns popular patriotic stories and histories on their heads; rather than celebrate the Founders, Melville implicates them in acts of exploitation, deception, and savagery. In telling the life story of Israel Potter, a veteran and unsuccessful applicant for a military pension, Melville investigates the manner in which the American citizen-soldier, the man who made the American victory possible, became the foremost victim of the Revolution.

The political dispute underlying both Melville’s novel and the chapbook that provided its basic narrative pitted the veterans of the Revolution against the government that denied them pensions. While Congress granted officers pensions at half-pay shortly after the conclusion of the war, it was not as generous to common soldiers: only those facing “decisive disability” or, following revisions to the pension law in 1818, “reduced circumstances,” were eligible (Young *Masquerade* 191). The application process, during which former soldiers
need furnish evidence of both their service and their need, remained fraught; successful applications required “an intricate array of proofs which few veterans could assemble” (229). Such difficulties belied the message that “the country always took care of its veterans” (237).

These policies simply perpetuated the harsh treatment of soldiers begun during the Revolution. In the midst of the war, soldiers were deprived of their wages as well as the supplies needed to sustain them in, and between, battles. To secure reenlistments the army sometimes misrepresented the terms of enlistment or made false promises regarding the soldiers’ pay (Royster 302-3). Those soldiers who stood up for their rights risked harsh discipline. In January 1780, Ann Glover, the widow of an executed mutineer, petitioned the General Assembly of North Carolina for support for herself and her children. Her husband’s punishment had been excessive, she believed; members of the North Carolina Line had gone unpaid for fifteen months prior to her husband’s protest. Ask yourselves, Glover addressed the members of the Assembly, “what must the Feeling of the Man be who fought at Brandywine, at Germantown, and at Stony Point and did his duty, when on another March in defence of his Country, with Poverty staring him full in the face, he was denied his Pay?” (qtd. in Royster 296-97). Even in the early days of the war, while public support for the army ran relatively high, family and supporters of the soldiers feared that their sacrifices would go unrewarded. Eliphalet Wright, a Separate Congregationalist minister from Connecticut, wrote in 1776: “As affairs are now going on, the common soldiers have nothing to expect, but that if America maintain her independency, they must become slaves to the rich” (qtd. in Royster 296). Wright’s fears were at least partially justified; as Young explains, “The pension rolls were shocking testimony to American poverty in a land of plenty, thirty-five years after the end of the Revolution” (Masquerade 237).
Well into the early national period, Revolutionary veterans from the lower classes continued to suffer for their service during the war. The majority of pensioners and applicants were members of the laboring classes. As John Resch writes, “By 1820, most claimants were laborers, artisans, or farmers in their mid-sixties. Most no longer owned real property and they were unable to work at full capacity. …[T]hey were either destitute, poor or propertyless.” (qtd. in Young Masquerade 236). These disadvantages placed veterans in a particularly perilous situation amidst the nation’s conversion to a market economy—a transition that found workers struggling to retain the dignity of their work, secure adequate wages, and limit the duration of the workday. Though workers gained some success in injecting their voice and interests into politics, they were nevertheless at the mercy of the market’s fluctuations as credit and commodity prices became more pronounced influences on the lives of Americans. In 1819, a downturn “plunged Americans into their first experience of general and devastating economic prostration” (Sellers 135-136). In the wake of the Panic, the government received over 28,000 pension applications—a number that reflects either a spike in the number of veterans in indigent circumstances or the extent of general desperation as the poor seized any available mechanism to appeal to the government for relief. Despite this outcry, the government continued its pattern of opposition to debt relief measures and other monetary policies that challenged the elite’s standing (Wood Radicalism 251-52). Conservatives, complaining of fraud and corruption within the pension system, as well its cost, pushed hard against any further liberalization of the policy (Young Masquerade 234).

Just as working class veterans found themselves written out of the pension rolls, so too were their roles minimized in the oral and written histories of the Revolution that
emerged during the immediate post-war period. Civilian elites, capitalizing on republican distrust of standing armies, sought to gather to themselves credit for the success of the Revolution and, consequently, gain power in the new republic. According to those who coordinated and financed the colonies’ resistance—and, eventually, according to many other common Americans who did not themselves serve in the military—soldiers’ service did not merit an enduring legacy. As Charles Royster explains, “Americans decided that they owed their independence less to their army than to the national virtue and courage that the soldiers partially and temporarily embodied” (329-30). “To believe that public virtue had the strength to sustain independence,” Royster continues, “Americans wanted to believe that public virtue had won it. This belief underlay the reinterpretation of the war, in which civilians could portray themselves as the rescuers of the army at Valley Forge rather than the main cause of the army’s hardship” (351).

The consequence of this revisionist history was that “[v]eterans of the Revolutionary War did not acquire unique admiration until the nineteenth century” (Royster 329). Only in 1832 did Congress approve a general pension fund for those who could establish service of six months or more in the cause of their nation (Young 191). In revising the law, the government also relaxed the requirements of proof necessary to secure a pension. This amendment partially explains the proliferation, between 1820 and 1840, of written lives of veterans; during this period an estimated eighty-thousand such narratives appeared (Young Masquerade 8).

These (auto)biographical narratives in part served a “documentary” purpose, preserving Revolutionary soldiers’ memories of their service at a time when their ranks were being whittled away by age (Kammen 199). Like the novels of the early republic, they
achieved egalitarian ends: they glorified the citizen-soldier and defended his importance to American democracy. Also like novels, these narratives offered the possibility of economic gain. A number of veterans’ narratives were published in chapbooks and cheap leaflets; these publications, should they become profitable, could provide a complement to the modest income provided by a pension, or could safeguard against the possible rejection of that application. These published narratives were curious hybrids: part deposition—ostensibly truthful accounts of the particulars of the veterans’ service—and part commodity—adventure stories intended to return a profit. Many of these “autobiographical” narratives were ghost-written or explicitly authored by enterprising, semi-professional writers, and their especially egregious instances of authorial embellishment or outright invention exposed the conflict between the documentary and profit motives of these works.

In January 1824, eight years prior to the revision of the pension law, Henry Trumbull of Providence, Rhode Island, wrote and published a narrative entitled Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter. Potter was “a native of Cranston Rhode Island—who was a soldier in the American Revolution, and took a distinguished part in the battle of Bunker Hill…” (288). The structure of the narrative reflects the priorities and burden of proof of the pension application: Trumbull emphasizes Potter’s service, the wounds he received on the battlefield, as well as his subsequent poverty; additionally, he appends to the narrative a deposition of a witness vouching for the veracity of the tale and for Potter’s character. In a notice “To the Public,” Trumbull explains Potter’s hopes for the publication of his autobiography:

As it yet remains doubtful whether…he will be so fortunate as to be included in that number to whom Government has granted pensions for their Revolutionary services, it is to obtain if possible a humble pittance as a remuneration, in part, for the unprecedented privations and sufferings of
which he has been the unfortunate subject, that he is now induced to
present the public with the following concise and simple narration of the
most extraordinary incidents of his life. (290)

By framing the narrative in this manner—by portraying Potter as “a patriotic victim of
circumstances” (Chacko and Culksa 386)—Trumbull aims to secure a sympathetic audience.
This sympathetic appeal is also reflected in the righteous indignation with which “Potter”
decries the injustice done when, “on no other principle, than that I was absent from the
country when the pension law passed—my Petition was REJECTED!!!” (391). The main
argument of the chapbook is that even that veteran who has endured the most suffering for
his nation is not guaranteed his due desserts.

Yet sympathy for the unfortunate Potter was not the only selling point for the
chapbook. Prospects for the narrative’s sales relied in part on Trumbull’s market savvy.
Trumbull’s earlier publications had proven quite popular; his History of the Discovery of
America (1810), later republished as History of the Indian Wars, became, according to
Richard Slotkin, “the most popular anthology of Indian war narratives in the nineteenth
century” (432). In this work, as well as the Lives that succeeded Potter’s—one the Life and
Adventures of Daniel Boone, the First White Settler of the State of Kentucky (1824) and the
other the Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts (1829)—Trumbull
succeeded in whetting the public’s appetite for adventure and sensationalism.

Potter’s story provided its own sensational elements. As explained on the title page
of the chapbook, after Bunker Hill, Potter

was taken Prisoner by the British, and conveyed to England where for
thirty years he attained a livelihood for himself and family by crying “old
Chairs to mend” through the Streets of London—In May last by the
assistance of the American Consul he succeeded in (the 79th year of his
age) in obtaining a passage to his native country after an absence of 48
years. (287)
The chapbook also describes Potter’s exploits as a spy, including a rendezvous with Benjamin Franklin in Paris, as well as his harrowing experiences of poverty in the slums of London. Trumbull’s questionable literary reputation and the “extraordinary” circumstances of the narrative suggest the likelihood that the work itself is a “warped enlargement of the truth,” a “masquerade” (Chacko and Culksa 386). Potter’s extended absence from his native land—a matter that the chapbook never satisfactorily explains—is just one aspect of the tale that raises the question of whether Potter’s pension application is the heroic narrative of a “patriot” or an attempted deception by a scheming author and a run-of-the-mill “robber.”

Melville’s motives in adapting the Potter narrative nearly thirty years after its publication partly rest in an honest sympathy for the protagonist’s undeserved misery. That sympathy first is reflected first in his description of his source; Potter’s chapbook is a cheap and ephemeral item that, like Melville’s own works, failed to sell. In his dedication, Melville describes how Potter’s narrative, “forlornly published on sleazy gray paper, appeared among the peddlers”—and there it stayed. “[T]his blurred record,” Melville remarks, “is now out of print”; his own account has been drawn “[f]rom a tattered copy, rescued by the merest chance from among the rag-pickers…” (v). By depicting Potter’s life—both the man’s existence as well as the printed object—in such a pathetic light, Melville suggests that his motives for adapting and thereby re-circulating the narrative are partly sympathetic.

In a figurative sense, the disappearance of Potter’s story from the collective memory of the Revolution reflects the indefinite hold of many Americans on the rewards of revolutionary freedom. Service in the cause of the nation did not guarantee protections for veterans and their families. Invoking the nation’s betrayal of its servicemen became a
common rhetorical feature of political tracts; echoing Ann Glover’s lament regarding her husband’s unrewarded service, later writers—many of whom were themselves descendants of veterans—decried how veterans’ service in the Revolution failed to purchase liberty for their descendants. Russ Castronovo has identified a number of works by marginalized or disenfranchised authors that exemplify this appeal, including the Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty Years among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America (1846). This narrative, Castronovo reports, finds the Clarkes, former slaves, “returning imaginatively to the site of their father’s freedom”—Bunker Hill—“only to find reminders of bondage” (4). “If I should creep up to the top of the Monument at Bunker’s Hill, beneath which my father fought, I should not be safe even there,” they wrote; “The slave-mongers have a right, by the laws of the United States, to seek me, even upon the top of the monument, whose base rests upon the bones of those who fought for freedom” (qtd. in Castronovo 4). Texts such as the Clarke’s narrative reveal how the labors of exploited groups lay the very foundation for American society. “Such bastard histories and aborted liberties,” Castronovo claims, “resist unity and disrupt the organization of historical narrative” (4). By recording both their father’s patriotic sacrifice and their own subjugation, the Clarkes inscribe a “juxtaposition that embarrasses national memory, exposing the monolithic yet hollow protections it offers” (5).

Similar motivations to “embarrass” national memory drove Melville’s composition of White Jacket (1849). In the more polemical passages of that earlier work, Melville addresses the contradictions between the nation’s egalitarian ideals and the iniquity of military justice on American men-of-war. Like Ann Glover and the Clarkes, Melville frames his attack of
corporal punishment and class stratification at sea in terms of a betrayal of the Revolution: “...[W]ill you say that a navy officer is a man, but that an American-born citizen, whose grandsire may have ennobled him by pouring out his blood at Bunker Hill—will you say that, by entering the service of his country as a common seaman, and standing ready to fight her foes, he thereby loses his manhood at the very time he most asserts it?” (146). In this case, Melville casts the problem of unequal justice as a consequence of the limited reach of the law: the sailor “shares none of our civil immunities; the law of our soil in no respect accompanies the national floating timbers grown thereon, and to which he clings as his home” (144). “For him our Revolution was in vain,” Melville declares; “to him our Declaration of Independence is a lie” (144). Though in this instance Melville continued to meditate upon the status of a sailor, he could just as easily have been referring to other marginalized groups within the nation. 

By evoking this failure of American idealism, Melville gestures toward the possible existence of a more insidious deception at the heart of American history. Later generations found themselves saddled with the revolutionaries’ inability to reconcile their egalitarian rhetoric with their commitment to institutions, including slavery, that perpetuated inequality; nevertheless, the inheritors of the Revolutionary legacy tended to view their history in terms of declension and the failure of the sons to meet the standard of the fathers. Yet the existence of slavery and widespread inequality begged a greater question: did the Founding Fathers believe their own rhetoric? Are the contradictions evident between the ideals of the Revolution and the reality of antebellum life the results of inadvertent quirks of the law or the products of a willful deception? Melville seized the opportunity of rewriting the Potter chapbook to interrogate these issues.
Unlike *White Jacket*, in which Melville explicitly advocates legislative action, *Israel Potter* is an indirect, though no less scathing, indictment of the hypocrisy of American history. Readers of the collected edition of the novel, upon opening to Melville’s dedication “To His Highness the Bunker-Hill Monument,” are immediately introduced to its ironic qualities that run counter to the ostensibly more charitable considerations that inspired its composition. The author sarcastically addresses the monument, referring to “the solid reward of your granite” and acknowledging that “your Highness be somewhat prematurely gray” (vi); Potter, meanwhile, “merits the present tribute—a private of Bunker Hill, who for his faithful services was years ago promoted to a still deeper privacy under the ground, with a posthumous pension, in default of any during his life, annually paid him by the spring in ever-new mosses and sward” (v). As these lines suggest, the monument offers only a dubious legacy. According to Castronovo, “[m]onumentalism stands as an ambivalent force: it provides impetus for national unity and independence even as it poses dangers of disempowerment and political estrangement”; thus, by implying a unity of memory, the monument necessitates the erasure of individual stories such as Israel’s (113-14).

Though in his dedication Melville advertises the work as biography, as one that “preserves, almost as in a reprint, Israel Potter’s autobiographical story,” privately he declared his intention to “serve up” the contents of the chapbook. Among the more obvious alterations made to the source, Melville expanded upon what was in the chapbook a mere reference to Potter’s meeting with Franklin in Paris; additionally, he inserted new storylines involving John Paul Jones and Ethan Allen, figures who do not appear in the chapbook.

Most significantly, Melville brings to his historical subject matter a deep sense of suspicion akin to that expressed by Cooper in *The Spy*. As Weir explains, “Cooper’s novel
ponders, but never fully resolves, the interrelation between republicanism and ‘natural aristocracy,’ the role of law in a nation that has divorced itself from the legal codes of its former government, and the relationship between England and America in the postbellum world” (90). Though Cooper maintains his ambivalence, Melville argues that these tensions cannot be resolved, or, rather, that they have been resolved in such a way as to benefit the already wealthy and powerful. Melville had hinted at this interpretation of America’s Revolutionary and early history in Pierre (1852), particularly through the “seeming futility of General Glendinning’s revolutionary exploits, which result only in a restoration of the prewar status quo” (Karcher 102). The unequal justice of the “natural aristocracy” is exacerbated, Melville asserts in Israel Potter, by industrialization and transatlantic commercialization, developments that re-solidify the bonds between Britain and America and which further impinge on the liberties of laborers. According to Caroline Karcher, “Nothing in Melville’s narrative reminds us that the Revolution ended in an American victory and the establishment of a democratic republic that purported to guarantee all men the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All that matters is that Israel reaps no rewards from this victory” (104). Despite the success of the Revolution, common Americans find themselves stuck in a state of dependency.

Hints of the static quality of American freedom appear throughout the narrative. At the opening of the novel, Melville sketches the landscape of the Berkshire region, hoping to find there “a significant hint of the temper of the men of the Revolutionary era” (5). What he finds is an inhospitable environment, a horizon crisscrossed by stone walls, which required “such wonderful pains to inclose so ungrateful a soil…” (4). Melville puzzles over the
inhabitants of the “solitary mountains towns” of New England, “the best stone-wall builders, as the best wood-choppers” (5). The similes that he arrives at to describe the temper of the Revolutionaries are ambiguous: they are “a tall, athletic, and hardy race, unerring with the axe as the Indian with the tomahawk; at stone-rolling, patient as Sisyphus, powerful as Samson” (5). One wonders whether such virtues are more accurately curses, given that all of these mythologized precursors of American character are doomed. Why, Melville wonders, “should [they] have accomplished such Herculean undertakings with so slight a prospect of reward [?]” (5). Such a question foreshadows the scant rewards earned by Potter—and, by extension, the American working classes—amidst his Revolutionary adventures.

Throughout the narrative Melville takes seriously the power of patriotism to motivate the “Herculean undertakings” of Revolutionaries. Yet he also considers that possibility that patriotism may open the path to exploitation. Following his capture by the British, Potter is brought to England. Outwitting his captors through a series of Yankee games, he sets out for London, where he finds shelter first from a nobleman and then in the employ of the King himself. While working the King’s Garden at Kew, he encounters the British monarch, who, due to Potter’s mannerisms and lack of deference, quickly identifies the American exile for what he is: an escaped prisoner-of-war. Though Israel fears that such detection will find him returned to captivity, the King promises to offer shelter. In this moment, Potter vacillates between fear and relief, between hatred and gratitude; he resists the urge to commit regicide as well as the temptation to abandon the cause of his country. Melville attributes this latter temptation to the “strange and powerful magic [that] resides in a crown,” as well as “that cheap and easy magnanimity, which in private belongs to most kings” and which “operate[s] on good-natured and unfortunate souls” (32). Melville credits the “peculiar disinterested
fidelity of our adventurer’s patriotism” for Potter’s not soon “sport[ing] the red coat”; yet he also recognizes that patriotism is responsible for his “long, long years of obscure and penurious wandering” (32). By recontextualizing Potter’s patriotism, Melville severely undercuts the defiant rhetoric of Potter’s declaration—to George III himself—“‘I have no king’” (31). Though no subject of the King, Potter fails to achieve any level of subjectivity; his course is plotted by chance and manipulation rather than through his own agency.

Key among the numerous changes in society through which Gordon Wood maps the “radicalism” of the American Revolution are an increase in credit and diminishment in deference. These changes trigger both an imagined and an actual sense of equality, providing ordinary people a greater sense of control over their affairs. The seeds of these changes lie in a number of different directions, including a revision in the conception of patriarchal authority. According to Jay Fliegelman, “By the middle of the eighteenth century family relations had been fundamentally reconsidered in both England and America. An older patriarchal family authority was giving way to a new parental ideal characterized by a more affectionate and equalitarian relationship with children” (1). The new, less hierarchical ideal, informed by Lockean sensationalism, emphasized the child’s education and nurture, as well as the “importance of personal autonomy and individual identity” (3). Fittingly, the “quintessential motif” of the American Revolution, Fliegelman claims, is one of “filial autonomy and unimpeded emergence from nonage” (3).

Potter’s story—both in the chapbook and in Melville’s text—fails to register this “unimpeded” development. Potter’s inability to form an unrestricted individual identity, grounded in labor and property, begins at the very outset of the story as the “tyranny of his father” prevents Israel’s marriage to a girl from a neighboring farm (8). Frustrated by his
father’s obstinacy, Israel travels to the wilderness of New Hampshire where he contracts to aid in the clearing of new farmland at the reward of two hundred acres of land. As will be the case throughout his life, Potter’s labor goes unrewarded: “His employer proving false to his contract in the matter of the land, and there being no law in the county to force him to fulfill it, Israel…was obliged to look round for other means of livelihood…” (8).

Reinvigorated by the success of later ventures in fur trading and improving the land, Potter returns home to renew his wooing, only to find his father yet “inflexibly determined against the match” (10). This insurmountable obstacle drives Israel to sea, where, “promoted to be harpooner, Israel, whose eye and arm had been so improved by practice with his gun in the wilderness, now further intensified his aim, by darting the whale-lance; still, unwittingly, preparing himself for the Bunker Hill rifle” (10).

There is a disconnect between the narrative structure of the opening of the novel, in which all of Israel’s actions foretell his impending heroism at Bunker Hill, and the prolonged account of captivity that assumes the bulk of the book. Throughout the novel Melville implies that Israel’s struggle for independence will be successful but then inscribes situations in which such attempts are frustrated. Though Melville claims that Israel’s exploits before going to the war “bred that fearless self-reliance and independence which conducted our forefathers to national freedom,” Potter himself never achieves any personal freedom (9).

Melville extends this dubious rhetoric even further, musing on Israel’s time spent as an Indian trader: “One fancies that, had it been summer, Israel would have travelled with a wheelbarrow, and so trundled his wares through the primeval forests, with the same indifference as porters roll their barrows over the flagging of streets” (9). This image of the wheelbarrow, which introduces the theme of Israel’s “self-reliance and independence,”
evokes the famous passage from Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* in which Franklin confesses to ostentatiously piloting a wheelbarrow through the streets of Philadelphia as a means “to secure my credit and character as a tradesman…” (66). This passage is central to the myths—and criticisms—of Franklin in that he elaborates on the importance of manipulating appearances; he declares his determination not only to make his way in business but to shape others’ perceptions of how he conducts his business: “I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all appearances to the contrary” (66). “[T]o show that I was not above my business,” Franklin writes, “I sometimes brought home the paper I purchas’d at the stores thro’ the streets on a wheelbarrow. Thus being esteem’d an industrious, thriving young man, and paying duly for what I bought, the merchants who imported stationery solicited my custom; others proposed supplying me with books, and I went on swimmingly” (66).

This passage suggests the important ways in which Franklin served as a transitional figure who helped usher in the productive ethos of the market economy. Franklin’s *Autobiography*, which illustrates his faith in the rationality of the capitalist market, as well as his assurance that the individual can fashion his own identity, provided an inspiring narrative in a newly fluid society and open economy. As Fliegelman explains, “The ultimate importance of Franklin’s biography lies in the fact that it is the optimistic report of a prodigal son, who by his own confession had carefully read in Locke’s ‘On Human Understanding’…that the world is not as dangerous a place as advertised, that its deceit and corruption could not only be withstood but, in fact, turned to advantage” (111). “The terrifying implication of Lockean epistemology that things are not as they seem,” as well as
the “problematic distinction between words and things,” “turns out to provide opportunities for the manipulation of appearances…” (111).

On one level, Franklin’s narrative was inspirational and empowering: “Rather than have his character formed in a world in which he is passive and vulnerable before the least impression, rather than be a victim of ‘the Circumstances of my life’…man may, by making the most of those circumstances, become self-made” (112). Franklin’s narrative was seized upon by many industrious Americans, and in particular by laborers who celebrated Franklin’s craft pride as well as the possibility that they, too, could rise through the ranks of American society.

At the same time, Franklin’s suggestion that he could influence appearances to comport with “reality” implies that the two need not be in accordance. Thus, Franklin’s method of self-fashioning opens to the door to deception. As David Waldstreicher emphasizes, Franklin’s rhetoric of self-fashioning necessarily elides those who do not have such opportunities of self-fashioning or whose liberty is truncated through others’ acts of creation: “The flip side of the self-made man in eighteenth-century America,” he writes, “was the servant and the slave” (Runaway 6).

Melville was particularly vexed by the social costs for workers amidst the transition to an impersonal marketplace. As Michael Gilmore concludes, Moby-Dick (1851) and “Bartleby” can be read as tales of “inaccessibility”—of “the growing distance between the classes which relegates men like Bartleby to invisibility and makes comprehension of them unlikely if not impossible in capitalist America” (132). The narrator of “Bartleby,” Gilmore asserts, links the old and new economies in that his paternalistic attitudes towards his employees “seems more appropriate to the antiquated, vaguely feudal world of masters and
servants than the actual working conditions emerging in mid-nineteenth century America” (133). Though used to assuming a familiar stance toward his workers, the narrator negates any sense of equality by erecting divisions, in the forms of doors and screens, between himself and the others. Far more damningly, Gilmore claims, is the fact that “[t]he lawyer’s paternalism simply precludes any acknowledgment of his employees’ autonomy” (134).

The passé ideal of “affectionate familiarity between the classes” represented by the narrator of “Bartleby”—and which, Gilmore asserts, “was often presented as an ideal in British fiction of the period”—can best be seen in Israel Potter in the figure of Sir John, the member of the British gentry who supplies Israel with new clothes and a place hoeing in his strawberry bed (Gilmore 133). Israel’s interactions with Sir John echo this sense of familiarity:

> …[O]ften, of mild, sunny afternoons, the knight, genial and gentle with dinner, would stroll bareheaded to the pleasant strawberry bed, and have nice little confidential chats with Israel; while Israel, charmed by the patriarchal demeanor of this true Abrahamic gentleman, with a smile on his lip, and tears of gratitude in his eyes, offered him, from time to time, the plumpest berries in the bed. (27)

Yet Sir John, like the narrator of “Bartleby,” erects divisions between himself and his dependents by insisting upon their deference. In Sir John’s case, the main sign of deference—and one that Israel consistently fails to satisfy—is to have his dependents address him by his title. Israel, the egalitarian Yankee, can only see to address Sir John as “Mr.”:

> “Mr. Millet,” exclaimed Israel aghast, the untasted wine trembling in his hand, “Mr. Millet, I—”

> “Mr. Millet—there it is again. Why don’t you say Sir John like the rest?”

> “Why, sir—pardon me—but somehow, I can’t. I’ve tried; but I can’t.”

> “Come, come; call me by my right name. I am not Mr. Millet. You have said Sir to me; and no doubt you have a thousand times said John to other
people. Now can’t you couple the two? Try once. Come. Only Sir and then John—Sir John—that’s all.”

“John—I can’t—sir, sir!—your pardon, I didn’t mean that.” (26)

Such comic moments bring levity to Potter’s travails; yet, once again, Melville chooses a moment of rather low humor as the context into which to inject what would otherwise be patriotic statements. In this instance, Sir John’s reaction to Potter’s bumbling response is intended to reflect the committed iconoclasm of Americans: “‘My good fellow,’ said the knight looking sharply upon Israel, ‘tell me, are all of your countrymen like you? If so, it’s no use fighting them’” (26). Though Israel’s unreflective iconoclasm is admirable, it is also worth noting the irony of this statement. For all Americans to be “like” Potter means not only that they would be iconoclasts but also that they could be disowned and exiled in the same fashion. In this instance of recontextualization, Melville reveals a further irony of Potter’s patriotism: Sir John, even with his demands of deference, is a more benevolent force in Potter’s life than is his own father, or the law in America.

Sir John’s paternalism seems particularly benevolent when compared with the treatment Potter receives at the hands of Benjamin Franklin. Recruited by English gentlemen sympathetic to the American cause to pass secret messages to Franklin, the American envoy in Paris, Potter leaves England for France. He arrives in Paris, concealing the messages in the false heels of his boots. En route to the doctor’s lodgings, Israel is accosted in the street by a shoeshine, and, fearing that the man will discover the secret dispatches, he kicks over the man’s box of polishes and brushes and flees. Upon recounting the incident for Franklin, the doctor “proceed[s] in the kindest and most familiar manner to read him a paternal detailed lesson upon the ill-advised act he had been guilty of…” (41).
Like Sir John, Franklin is described as a paternal or patriarchal figure, yet the nature of Franklin’s patriarchy is different—at least in appearances. Franklin represents a false egalitarianism between “father” and “son”; though his rhetoric echoes the revolutionary equalitarianism referred to by Fliegelman, Franklin regularly engages his personality and written texts to gain economic and political advantage. Historians have noted how Franklin’s habit for manipulating appearances was put to good use during his diplomatic mission to France. His goals in this endeavor were to secure French support for the rebellion, to sell the French on the viability of an American state, and to advertise the finer points of American character. Franklin became known among the Parisian elite for wearing a humble brown suit and a fur hat—an image perpetuated in a drawing by Charles-Nicholas Cochin and subsequent engraving by Augustin de Saint-Aubin (Wood Americanization 176). Franklin’s selection of frontier garb for his ventures into Paris salons was an extension of his lifelong project of carefully crafting his self-image. As Gordon Wood has illustrated, central to Franklin’s project of self-creation were not only his autobiography and myriad writings but also the series of portraits of himself that he commissioned over the span of his career. These portraits, Wood proves, served to project the shifting sets of ideals that represented his rise from an industrious laborer to a man of leisure. The irony of the paintings, of course, was that they—like his fur hat—projected qualities that ran counter to his current status; for example, the man of leisure depicted in the early portraits had not yet attained such a comfortable estate, while the humble mechanic of the later portraits was in fact of such a status that he could obtain servants and slaves to do his work. Likewise, the brown suit and fur hat put a false, folksy front on the cosmopolitan scientist who had spent much of his recent life abroad.
“Franklin’s dressing down in France,” David Waldstreicher writes, “is rightly seen as a studied projection of rustic new world simplicity as imagined by the French” (Runaway 217). Franklin’s dress was self-consciously of the Quaker style, and was intended to reflect those qualities—“egalitarianism, rationalism, and simplicity”—that Frenchmen like Voltaire identified with that sect. As Waldstreicher explains, Franklin’s Quaker costume was also, “by implication, antislavery”—another misleading appearance. In reality, Franklin, an often outspoken advocate of abolition, was perfectly willing to sidestep the contradictions between Americans’ denunciations of British oppression and their practice of owning slaves (Runaway 217). Such contradictions lent credence to the nickname Franklin had earned among his political opponents in Pennsylvania: “Dr. Doubleface” (204).

Melville’s depiction of Franklin in Israel Potter encapsulates this sense of irony. Upon his entrance into the narrative, the narrator unfurls a series of biblical and historical types for Franklin, finding particular fidelity between the figures of Franklin, the biblical king Jacob, and the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. “[H]istory presents few trios more akin, upon the whole, than Jacob, Hobbes, and Franklin,” the narrator contends; all three are “labyrinth-minded, but plain-spoken Broadbrims; at once politicians and philosophers; keen observers of the main chance; prudent courtiers; practical magians in linsey woolsey” (46-47). Such comparisons are struck in tongue-in-cheek fashion. Melville’s brief musings on these analogous characters are largely positive: he praises Hobbes’s fluid writing style, as well as Jacob’s ability to blend the affectations of “diplomatist and shepherd.” Yet the bulk of Melville’s characterization of Franklin suggests the more problematic behavior modeled by this significant pair: for instance, Hobbes’s dismissal of charity in favor of an ethic of “do no harm,” or Jacob’s masquerade as his older brother, Esau, as a means of securing his
father’s inheritance. In this manner, Melville casts Franklin as someone more than willing to seize “the main chance,” and the terms in which he writes of Franklin consequently vacillate between those suitable to describe a renaissance man and a confidence man:

Having carefully weighed the world, Franklin could act any part in it. …Printer, postmaster, almanac maker, essayist, chemist, orator, tinker, statesman, humorist, philosopher, parlor-man, political economist, professor of housewifery, ambassador, projector, maxim-monger, herb-doctor, wit:—Jack of all trades, master of each and mastered by none—the type and genius of his land. Franklin was everything but a poet. (48)

Melville’s physical descriptions of Franklin and his lodgings reinforce the mysterious and veiled qualities of his character. Upon entering Franklin’s chambers, Potter finds the sage “Wrapped in a rich dressing-gown—a fanciful present from an admiring Marchesa—curiously embroidered with algebraic figures like a conjuror’s robe, and with a skull-cap of black satin on his hive of a head…” (38). Franklin is suitably “seated at a huge claw-footed old table, round as the zodiac,” while “[t]he walls had a necromantic look; hung round with barometers of different kinds; drawings of surprising inventions…crowded topographical and trigonometrical charts of various parts of Europe; with geometrical diagrams, and endless other hangings and upholstery of science” (38-39).

The chief effect of Franklin’s magic—an exaggeration of Franklin’s tendency for invention—is to trample further on the rights of the already oppressed Potter. Upon their first encounter, Franklin lectures Israel on the proper design for boots then seeks to exert his influence as Potter engages in a series of acts of reading. When Israel retires to his own apartment, he encounters an array of items placed on his mantelpiece, their labels carrying mysterious headings like “E-a-u—d-e—C-o-l-o-g-n-e,” and “O-t-a-r-d” (50). After examining the jars and boxes of toiletries and fixing their various identities, Israel ventures an interpretation of a particularly mysterious item: “‘O-t-a-r-d is brandy….That’s my
reading,’” he concludes (50). When he later inquires with Franklin as to the accuracy of his reading, he is told: “‘Otard is poison’” (51). This act of misrepresentation—a characteristic act in which Franklin manipulates the gap between words and things—echoes an earlier scene in which Israel, having been told by Franklin that his dinner is accompanied by a glass of “‘White wine of the very oldest brand…’” finds that he has been given only water to drink (44). Though Franklin permits his guest a glass of water—“‘Plain water is a very good drink for plain men’”—brandy is forbidden. “…I think I had best remove it from the room forthwith,” Franklin explains, then, identifying each item as an unnecessary extravagance, proceeds to clear the mantelpiece of its contents. Potter, distraught as Franklin flees the room burdened by bottles, replies, “‘Oh, you had better take the whole furniture, Doctor Franklin. Here, I’ll help you drag out the bedstead’” (51).

Franklin is able to accomplish his deceptions through the force of his personality. Even after Israel is robbed of his toiletries and brandy, he does not immediately hold a grudge: “‘Not till the first impression of the venerable envoy’s suavity had left him, did Israel begin to surmise the mild superiority of successful strategy which lurked beneath this highly ingratiating air’” (52). Later on Potter does ponder the manner in which Franklin affects his manipulations: “‘Every time he comes in he robs me,’ soliloquised Israel, dolefully; ‘with an air all the time, too, as if he were making me presents’” (53).

Franklin’s rhetoric, Potter realizes, is effective in that Franklin constructs himself as a benevolent educator whose lessons will ultimately empower his audience. His lessons, however, have the opposite effect on Israel, and our hero recognizes the hypocrisy with which Franklin addresses him as an equal and then treats him unjustly: “‘If he thinks me such a very sensible young man, why not let me take care of myself?’” (53).
This disconnect between Franklin’s rhetoric and manipulation becomes doubly evident to Potter after Franklin gives him a copy of Poor Richard’s Almanac. At first glance, Potter assumes that Poor Richard’s aphorisms are intended for someone of the humbler sort like himself: “‘here’s “Poor Richard;” I am a poor fellow myself; so let’s see what comfort he has for a comrade’” (54). Franklin’s written advice, much like his hospitality, provides Israel with no comfort at all.

Opening the little pamphlet, at random, Israel’s eyes fell on the following passages: he read them aloud—

“‘So what signifies wishing and hoping for better times? We may make these times better, if we bestir ourselves. Industry need not wish, and he that lives upon hopes will die fasting, as Poor Richard says. There are no gains, without pains. Then help, hands, for I have no lands, as Poor Richard says.’” (54, italics in original)

Though in many ways Potter represents the humble industry advocated by Franklin, his life story shows that industry alone does not promise success. Consequently, he finds that Poor Richard, rather than a comrade, appears to be speaking for someone other than himself. “‘Oh confound all this wisdom!’” he cries. “‘It’s a sort of insulting to talk wisdom to a man like me. It’s wisdom that’s cheap, and it’s fortune that’s dear. That ain’t in Poor Richard; but it ought to be,’ concluded Israel, suddenly slamming down the pamphlet” (54). This complaint makes plain an observation of Waldstreicher’s: “For all his protestations of poverty, all his complaints and acceptance of subjection, Poor Richard gave advice intended for masters and those who aspired to be masters” (Runaway 109). Though Potter aspires to better himself, he lacks the fortune—in both senses of the word—necessary to affect such improvement.

There is an element of deception at work in the almanac worthy of Barnum’s exhibitions. Both Franklin’s almanacs and Barnum’s amusements play with truth and place
the ultimate burden of divining truth on their audience. The terms with which Waldstreicher writes of the Poor Richard’s almanacs parallel those of Cook’s characterization of Barnum’s deceptions:

Franklin’s almanacs were not satire: they were well-developed examples of a popular culture innovation that kept the genre going by acknowledging the reader’s suspicion (after more than a century of popular annual almanacs) and even encouraging and rewarding it. Their very humor made them in the end more effective as a vehicle for both morality and for teaching market savviness. The readers were in on the joke; it was up to them to decide when to laugh and when to listen carefully. (103, my emphasis)

The punchline in Melville’s depiction of Franklin is that Franklin equates morality with market savviness. For instance, Franklin advises Potter to avoid debt by being fastidious and goes through a show of lending Potter money, unsolicited, so that the younger, less fortunate man is obligated to follow his advice. “‘My honest friend,’” Franklin tells Israel, “‘in pecuniary matters always be exact as a second-hand; never mind with whom it is, father or stranger, peasant or king, be exact to a tick of your honor’” (42). Potter once again reads the situation and, realizing that there is no purpose to the transaction other than to place him in a position of obligation to Franklin, decides to immediately return the money: “‘Well, Doctor,’ said Israel, ‘since exactness in these matters is so necessary, let me pay back my debt in the very coins in which it was loaned. There will be no mistake then’” (42). In completing the charade, Franklin cheerfully takes the money back, telling his “‘honest friend,’” “‘I like your straightforward dealing’” (43).

Melville criticizes Franklin’s position by asserting that such “straightforward dealing” is often, as it is here, a mere show; more often than not, it is a direct repudiation of charity. In counseling Potter to watch his accounts even when dealing with family or the poor, Franklin offers the brand of self-righteous advice that leads to economic security but also the
degradation of others. Though here Melville takes Franklin as his primary target for his embodiment of such principles, in other works he broadened out his criticism to denounce the internally focused philosophy that foreclosed the possibility of, or cheapened, American charity. For example, in the “Hypothetical Friends” chapter of The Confidence Man (1857), Melville critiques Transcendentalism for perpetuating the injustice of Franklin’s devotion to the self. In this chapter, Egbert, the disciple of the philosopher Mark Winsome, engages in a “hypothetical” discussion with the cosmopolitan in which they pretend to be life-long friends. The crux of this discussion is that the cosmopolitan asks his “friend” for a loan. Egbert, who critics have long established as a stand-in for Thoreau, declines to extend the loan, citing as his excuse his “‘philosophy’” which “‘teaches plaindealing’” (242). Though Egbert’s philosophy—which he has adopted wholesale from Winsome—including a metaphysical dimension absent from Franklin’s almanac advice, the effect of his “plaindealing” is the same. “‘Man has a soul,’” Egbert counsels the cosmopolitan; “‘which, if he will, puts him beyond fortune’s finger and the future’s spite. Don’t whine like fortune’s whipped dog, Frank, or by the heart of a true friend, I will cut ye’” (243). Both Franklin and Egbert attribute success to some internal quality—an industrious nature, or the soul—and thereby downplay the extent of interdependence between members of society. While both figures offer a vision of autonomy in which individuals are freed from dependence upon others, they also release the individual from a sense of benevolent or selfless obligation to the less fortunate. The self-made man is beholden to no one. Indeed, personal failure is in no way a result of misfortune but results from some inherent failing in the individual. As Egbert explains, “‘there is something wrong about the man who wants help. There is somewhere a defect, a want, in brief, a need, a crying need, somewhere about that man’” (243).
In the case of both Franklin and Egbert, principle prevents any genuine interaction between themselves and others. For example, Franklin’s devotion to instilling in others the discipline of diet and thrift that he advocates in the almanacs prevents him from hearing Israel’s objections to the utility of self-denial. Upon realizing that his wine is in fact water, Israel recounts the fine drinks which he was given by the British gentlemen who sent him on his mission. Franklin dismisses their actions as wasteful, an idea that he illustrates by calculating the price of a bottle of wine and then finding a more “practical” analogue to illustrate its cost. At the price of one hundred and fifty-six pence, Franklin contends, a bottle of wine is equal to seventy-eight two-penny rolls. “Now,” the sage asks Israel, “do you not think that for one man to swallow down seventy-eight two-penny rolls at one meal is rather extravagant business?” Israel resists Franklin’s logic: “But he drank a bottle of wine; he did not eat seventy-eight two-penny rolls, Doctor.” For Israel, this is a false comparison; there is more value in the exchange than can be conveyed in purely economic terms. Yet Franklin persists in his economic reasoning: “He drank the money worth of seventy-eight loaves, which is drinking the loaves themselves; for money is bread” (44).

The ideology of the market remains inherently exploitative. Throughout their encounter, Franklin works to impose his will on Potter by critiquing the design of his boots, by limiting his choices, by coercing Potter to engage in an economic exchange that reflects on Franklin’s own good credit, and by curtailing Israel’s ability to determine for himself the usefulness of the objects placed on his mantelpiece. Franklin’s power comes not from any inherent quality of his ideas, but rather from his success in using those ideas to control the behaviors of others. As Franklin states, “you can’t improve so well on ideas, as you can on bodies” (59).
The market principles popularized by Franklin during the eighteenth century firmly took root in the nineteenth, with the effect of pushing workingmen to the margins of society. Though many Americans continued to look upon their society as one without distinct classes, Melville counted himself among those who saw social divisions deepening, particularly in industrializing urban areas or in the factory towns of the countryside. Through such short fiction as “Bartleby,” “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” and “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”—all works published in magazines within months of the serialization of Israel Potter—Melville railed against the increasing class stratification that accompanied Americans’ commitment to the market. He took seriously the possibility that the widespread poverty of the British cities could migrate across the Atlantic to America. Consequently, his depictions of poverty in the London slums—inspired by the “true” accounts of the chapbook—should be considered not only a denunciation of British poverty but also an indictment of American society for its inhumane treatment of the poor.

The problem of poverty, Melville asserts, perpetuates itself through society’s inclination to look away from the problem and through the destructive effects that irredeemable labor and social stigmatism have on the impoverished. When Israel first arrives in England, he adopts the garb of a beggar as a disguise, knowing that the appearance of extreme need will deflect, rather than garner, attention—“For who does not shun the scurvy wretch, Poverty, advancing in battered hat and lamentable coat?” (78). The lower members of British society are described in depraved terms, beginning with the “human steers” Israel encounters working the land during his flight toward London (18). When, following his adventures with John Paul Jones, Potter becomes marooned in London without any means of
support, he learns the hardships that come with such dismissal. During this second episode in London, Israel falls in with a group of brick makers whose work is described as drudgery:

“All night long, men sat before the mouth of the kilns, feeding them with fuel. A dull smoke—a smoke of their torments—went up from their tops” (156). When the bricks’ baking is complete, Israel peers into the kilns. The products of the brick makers’ work serve as a metaphor for British society, whose upper crust lives sheltered lives and whose bottom layer is overcome by adversity:

The bricks immediately lining the vaults would be all burnt to useless scrolls, black as charcoal, and twisted into shapes the most grotesque; the next tier would be a little less withered, but hardly fit for service; and gradually, as you went higher and higher along the successive layers of the kiln, you came to the midmost ones, sound, square, and perfect bricks, bringing the highest prices; from these the contents of the kiln gradually deteriorated in the opposite direction, upward. But the topmost layers, though inferior to the best, by no means presented the distorted look of the furnace-bricks. The furnace-bricks were haggard, with the immediate blistering of the fire—the midmost ones were ruddy with a genial and tempered glow—the summit ones were pale with the languor of too exclusive an exemption from the burden of the blaze. (156)

Particularly noteworthy in this passage is how, though both extremes of the strata—the lowest and highest classes—are removed from productive labor, only the lowest class suffers the disfiguring and blistering burden of dehumanizing work. The brick makers, meanwhile, exhibit a “reckless sort of half-jolly despair,” a condition akin to Bartleby’s “dead wall reveries.” Though these afflictions differ in the material conditions from which they arise—one stems from brutish manual labor, the other from the white collar work of the office—they both have as their cause labor that does not involve the worker intellectually or spiritually in the process of production. The brick makers’ recklessness is a direct extension of the labor process: “The truth was, that this continual, violent, helter-skelter slapping of the dough into the moulds, begat a corresponding disposition in the moulder; who, by heedlessly
slapping that sad dough, as stuff of little worth, was thereby taught, in his meditations, to slap, with similar heedlessness, his own sadder fortunes, as of still less vital consideration” (155). “To these muddy philosophers,” Melville continues, “men and bricks were equally of clay. What signifies who we be—dukes or ditchers? thought the moulders; all is vanity and clay” (155). This lack of regard for their own well-being, and lack of investment in their work, is not—as Franklin would contend—the result of a lack of industry; rather it is a product of their material conditions: “If this recklessness were vicious of them, be it so; but their vice was like that weed which but grows on barren ground; enrich the soil and it disappears” (155).

The depictions of the lowest bricks in the kiln, those “black as charcoal, and twisted into shapes the most grotesque,” could very well be a comment on slavery. According to Karcher:

From Redburn onward, Melville created fictional parallels between all the situations the Negro faced in America as a slave and second-class citizen and the situations faced by exploited groups of other races. He showed whites developing the same traits under these conditions as the Negro was thought to exhibit by nature; and he dramatized the various ways in which people of all races react to exploitation, from adjustment to passive resistance to outright rebellion. More subversively, Melville continually undermined the very concept of race that lay at the bases of racial prejudice… (27)

Taking Karcher’s comments as a guide, one notices that the bricks—though perhaps sloppily constructed in this case—are universally composed of the same stuff. The varying results of their production are not the consequence of unequal distribution of quality, but rather the outcome of unequal placement within the kiln. If the lowest bricks are “twisted into shapes the most grotesque,” their disfigurement is not an inherent quality but a result of their experience of “the immediate blistering of the fire.”
Implicit in the Parisian portion of the book is an indictment of imperialist and industrialist practice. In addition to Potter, the other “bodies” upon which Franklin intends to impose his will are those who will fall victim to America’s future conquest and economic development. Among the many other items decorating the walls of Franklin’s apartment are wide maps of far countries in the New World, containing vast empty spaces in the middle, with the word DESERT diffusely printed there, so as to span five-and-twenty degrees of longitude with only two syllables,—which printed word however bore a vigorous pen-mark, in the Doctor’s hand, drawn straight through it, as if in summary appeal of it…(38)

This alteration in the map reflects Americans’ revived interest in Western lands and peoples that are primed for exploitation. Reminders of American expansion ring through much of the book. The character of John Paul Jones, in particular, serves as a representation of the continuing Indian presence in America and of the importance of the Indian in the configuration of American identity. As Philip Deloria explains, “in order to complete their right of passage” of establishing a national identity independent of England, “Americans had to displace either the interior or the exterior Indian Other.” Indians were both integral to the process of identity formation and obstacles to that same process, embodying qualities that Americans sought to embrace and to shun—such as independence and savagery. “As long as Indian Others represented not only us, but also them,” Deloria asserts:

Americans could not begin to resolve the questions swirling around their own identity vis-à-vis Indians and the British. Yet choosing one or the other would remove an ideological tool that was essential in propping up American identity. There was, quite simply, no way to conceive an American identity without Indians. At the same time, there was no way to make a complete identity while they remained. (37)

Jones, whom Potter first meets in Franklin’s apartments, embodies these conflicting tensions between savagery and civilization; he is initially described as “a rather small, elastic, swarthy man, with an aspect as of a disinherited Indian chief in European clothes” (56). This motif of
Jones’ Indian-ness continues, as he is described in such terms as “wrapped in Indian meditations” (62), as “a parading Sioux demanding homage to his gew-gaws” (58), and as “a prowling brave…a solitary warrior” (95). Meanwhile, his body is marked as savage through the tattoos that cover his arms: “It was a sort of tattooing such as is only seen on thoroughbred savages—deep, blue, elaborate, labyrinthine, cabalistic” (62). Jones, despite his markings as an “Other” becomes for Melville a representative American figure: “intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations” (120).

Attributing these characteristics to the America of the 1850s, to a nation that had recently concluded an elective war against Mexico, would not have been a shock to Melville’s readers, particularly those who had read the “Fast Fish and Loose Fish” chapter of **Moby-Dick**, in which Melville predicts the future annexation of all of Mexico. Depicting the American nation from its founding as a force of imperialism and oppression, however, was a more radical statement. Again, Melville had laid the groundwork for this argument in **Moby-Dick**; in “The Affidavit” chapter, he finds in the history of early American settlement a type for not only New England whaling excursions—representative examples of nineteenth century savagery and exploitation—but also Ahab’s obsessive pursuit of the white whale, “as in setting out through the Narragansett Woods, Captain Church of old had it in his mind to capture that notorious murderous savage Annawon, the headmost warrior of the Indian King Philip” (223).

By identifying Jones as a representative of the savagery evident in nineteenth century American imperialism, Melville contradicts the common representation of the Revolution as an orderly and largely intellectual affair. Moreover, he directly refutes persistent attempts by
American conservatives to distinguish between the American and French Revolutions by idealizing the order of the former while sensationalizing the social disruptions of the latter. These conservative responses served not only to minimize social upheaval in America by downplaying the radical nature of the Revolution, but also to erase the exploitation of unrepresented groups in the process of winning independence. Melville uses Jones to directly counter each of these claims. The presence of Jones, a “jaunty barbarian in broad-cloth,” in Paris, “the heart of the metropolis of modern civilization,” produces a vision in which Jones is transformed into

a sort of prophetical ghost, glimmering in anticipation upon the advent of those tragic scenes of the French Revolution which levelled the exquisite refinement of Paris with the blood-thirsty ferocity of Borneo; showing that broaches and finger-rings, not less that nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilised or uncivilised. (63)

The exact nature of Jones’s contribution to the war effort is curious. In his interview with Franklin, Jones requests command of a ship so that he may conduct raids on the British coast/homeland. This request is also imbued with significance, as the warship he covets is named the Indien: “‘Give me the Indien,’” he pleads with Franklin, “‘and I will rain down on wicked England like fire on Sodom’” (56). Though this configuration of the Indian as a vehicle of judgment against the British echoes the early American jeremiads, Jones’s motivations for this mission resonate in the context of British-American tensions: “‘I would teach the British that Paul Jones, though born in Britain, is no subject to the British King, but an untrammelled citizen and sailor of the universe…’” (56). While speaking “[t]hese words of bravado,” Jones sits “[e]rect upon his chair, like an Iroquois,” his “look…like that of an unflickering torch” (56). Franklin quickly dismisses this plan, determined to have Jones address the problem of “‘the Jersey privateers [who] do us a great deal of mischief by
intercepting our supplies” (57). In determining the nature of Jones’s command, Franklin (who appears to wield supreme influence not only over Jones but also the government officials who defer to his judgment) must choose to what extent he wants to empower a potentially renegade force in society. Though a valuable ally in the fight against the British, the force Jones represents also constitutes a potential threat to American society. To give Jones free rein in his command would be to affirm him in his standing as “an untrammelled citizen” and—since Jones serves as a proxy representative of an oppressed group, the victims of not only British but also American policy—to refute the nation’s history that has produced Indians as “disinherited.” Much safer to have Jones safeguard the nation’s mercantile interests, Franklin concludes.

Though following this meeting Jones and Potter part ways, they later regroup and, with Israel as Paul’s right hand, undertake the long-planned raids on British ports. This portion of the narrative supplies a number of comic episodes (including one incident in which, compelled by a British craft to surrender a supply of gunpowder, Jones hands over a keg of pickles) and then solidifies the indictment of imperialism implicit in the Paris interlude. The famous encounter between Jones’s craft, the Bon Homme Richard, and the British ship, the Serapis, serves as the culmination of this portion of the narrative.

This naval battle, immortalized by writers including Walt Whitman, who devotes a portion of “Leaves of Grass” (1855) to a description of the battle, was famous for its desperately contested nature; as Melville describes the battle, the outcome was unclear to the very end: “So equal was the conflict that, even after the surrender, it could be, and was, a question to one of the warriors engaged (who had not happened to see the English flag hauled down) whether the Serapis had struck to the Richard, or the Richard to the Serapis” (129).
The confrontation was also enshrined in the nation’s memory for Jones’s defiant rhetoric in proclaiming, even as his ship is being destroyed, “I have not yet begun to fight.” Though the Bon Homme Richard rather than the Serapis ultimately sinks, the Americans commandeer the other vessel and declare victory.

Among the infamous details of the battle described in Cooper’s History is the reported proximity of the two ships; accounts of the battle refer to the interlocking of the ships’ rigging. Melville seizes upon this image of the apparent conjoining of the ships to indict both the United States and Britain for carrying on a campaign of imperialism and exploitative industrialization.

Though narratives of the Revolution almost universally amplify differences between the British and the Americans, Melville minimizes such differences, proclaiming that the battle between the Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis “seemed more an intestine feud, than a fight between strangers. Or, rather, it was as if Siamese Twins, oblivious of their fraternal bond, should rage in unnatural fight” (125). This clash is “unnatural” in that it pits against one another two forces who for the most part share a history and culture. Part of that history and culture is a commitment to imperialism and industrialization, which Melville describes in similarly “unnatural” terms: “Up to their two long death-dealing batteries, the trained men of the Serapis stood and toiled in mechanical magic of discipline. They tended those rows of guns, as Lowell girls the rows of looms in a cotton factory. The Parcae were not more methodical; Atropos not more fatal; the automaton chess-player not more irresponsible” (127).

These passages are significant not only for the manner in which Melville employs images from nineteenth century popular culture to reflect on the depraved nature of the
battle, but also because many of these images are central to his other fictions of the period in which he offers an expansive critique of capitalism’s dehumanizing effects. For example, the “Siamese Twin” image that he employs to delineate the relationship between the ships echoes the language of “The Monkey Rope” chapter of Moby-Dick. In this chapter, in which Ishmael suspends Queequeg above the sea by means of a rope as the harpooner harvests the carcass of a whale, Melville adopts the connection between these men as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of individuals in a commercial society. As Ishmael notes of the “monkey rope” arrangement, “an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed” (349). Ishmael first contemplates the implications of the monkey rope for his own self-possession: “I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death” (349). Ishmael’s connection to Queequeg only scratches the surface of the connections and liabilities that link individuals in a market economy: “I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or another, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die” (349).

Michael Gilmore reads “The Monkey Rope” in positive terms: “The trope, ‘joint stock company of two,’” he asserts, “encapsulates the idea that commerce can foster a sense of trust and mutual responsibility. While the perils of the monkey-rope are undeniably real, so are the feelings of affection which strongly color this episode, causing Ishmael to call
Queequeg his ‘dear comrade and twin-brother’” (122). Furthermore, Gilmore asserts, Ishmael, as the narrator of the text, “establishes a monkey-robe bond” not only with Queequeg but also “with the reader by constantly appealing for support, offering assistance, or joining forces to solve a problem” (122). Gilmore links the self-conscious artistry of Ishmael’s narration to the “artisanal tradition of storytelling,” a tradition that gainfully involves both the artist and the audience in the process of production (121).

The description of battle in Israel Potter is stripped of these positive connotations, just as the narrative as a whole is stripped of altruistic narrative interventions. The reader of Israel Potter is without a guide and must navigate deeply ironic passages such as the dedication to the Bunker Hill monument and the scenes involving Franklin in which the authorial voice appears intentionally to set the reader on the wrong track toward understanding his meaning. Moreover, none of the altruism and fellow-feeling of the monkey rope chapter pervades the images of industry that suffuse the description of the sailors of the Serapis. Rather, these images, particularly that of the “Lowell girls,” echo Melville’s diptych “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” Melville employs the two-part structure of this tale to elaborate on the luxurious lifestyle of London lawyers and the soul-stifling labor of the “girls” at a New England paper mill. Just as the two ships are conjoined, so the narrator of this tale ultimately recognizes the interconnections of these economies: the shirts of the lawyers supply pulp for the paper mill, while paper makes the labor of the lawyers possible. Despite the interdependence of these economies in which the labors of one makes possible that of the other, only one class of participants benefits from the exchange. Mechanical labor, the narrator learns, transforms workers into ciphers; the young women who work at the paper mill are degraded to “blank-faced girls.” Those who labor
long enough in the factory become as inhuman as the chief attraction of one of Barnum’s exhibitions: the automaton chess player.

Melville, like Whitman in “Leaves of Grass,” begins his account of the battle by invoking romantic associations with the battle. Upon the sea “[a]ll is clear, open, fluent”; “[t]he very element which sustains the combatants, yields at the stroke of a feather.” Consequently, “[s]tratagems,—like those of disciplined armies, ambushes—like those of Indians, are impossible….This simplicity renders a battle between two men-of-war, with their huge white wings, more akin to the Miltonic contests of archangels than to the comparatively squalid tussels of earth” (122). In this archetypal struggle, John Paul Jones most closely resembles Milton’s Satan: “His Parisian coat, with its gold-laced sleeve laid aside, disclosed to the full the blue tattooing on his arm, which sometimes in fierce gestures streamed in the haze of the cannonade, cabalistically terrific as the charmed standard of Satan” (126). In the moonlight, “Objects before perceived with difficulty, now glimmered ambiguously” (123). This ambiguity, coupled with the brutality of the contest and its uncertain outcome, finds the sailors transformed into various forms, some fantastic yet all dehumanized. Amidst the smoke of the cannonades and the fires bursting out upon the decks, the sailors appear “like miners from the fire-damp” (125); as the men, following Jones’s example, strip off their restrictive shirts, they resemble “fauns and satyrs” (126). Melville continues to employ larger-than-life images to express the magnitude of the destruction. The Alliance, “a consort of the Richard,” enters the fray and, somehow mistaking the identity of its target, fires upon the Richard; compounding the punishment that the Richard had received at the hands of the Serapis, the Alliance’s attack “was like the great fire of London, breaking out on the heel of the great Plague” (128). “In view of this battle,”
Melville writes upon the conclusion of the clash, “one may well ask—What separates the enlightened man from the savage? Is civilization a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?” (130).

Another relevant question raised by this episode is, what is the role of heroism in the midst of such a battle? Like Melville, Whitman describes the battle in brutal terms; lines such as, “Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves…dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars” (695), anticipate the increased realism of Civil War literature and photography. Yet, amidst this carnage, Whitman’s Jones retains honorable associations: “I laughed content when I heard the voice of my little captain, / We have not struck, he composedly cried, We have just begun our part of the fighting” (694). Melville, by contrast, imbues Jones’s cry with the same savagery that has colored the rest of the scene: “‘I have not yet begun to fight,’ howled sinking Paul” (128). The excess of the battle, both in lives lost and the ruthlessness of the combatants, transforms its outcome to a symbol of sinfulness: “About ten o’clock, the Richard, gorged with slaughter, wallowing heavily, gave a long roll, and blasted by tornadoes of sulphur, slowly sunk, like Gomorrah, out of sight” (130).

The sins for which the combatants pay are evident in Melville’s description of the ships locked together:

The belligerents were no longer, in the ordinary sense of things, an English ship, and an American ship. It was a co-partnership and joint-stock combustion-company of both ships; yet divided, even in participation. The two vessels were as two houses, through whose party-wall doors have been cut; one family (the Guelphs) occupying the whole lower story; another family (the Ghibelines) the whole upper story. (126)

This scenario reinforces a number of points made earlier in the chapter. First, as evident by the letter he sent to his already dead Gansevoort, Melville believed that England and America shared a future of destruction. Their shared investment in colonialism and industry are
represented here by the “joint-stock combustion-company,” which is a corrupted inversion of the “joint stock company of two” represented by the monkey rope. Unlike Ishmael and Queequeg, who are united not only in their economic activity but also through genuine affection, the British and American ships of state are “divided” even as they form a “co-partnership” in their policies of exploitation. Just as Melville prognosticated a cataclysmic confrontation between the nations in his letter, so does he foresee destruction as the outcome of this endeavor: “Mutual obliteration from the face of the waters seemed the only natural sequel to hostilities like these” (129).

Caroline Karcher offers additional insight into the larger symbolism of this episode, asserting that the battle between the Bon Homme Richard and the Serapis comments indirectly on the United States’ commitment to slavery. Melville, Karcher explains, uses the same terms—the Guelphs and the Ghibelines—in his supplement to Battle-Pieces to describe divisions between North and South over slavery (105). Thus, Karcher contends, the Serapis episode “expresse[s] Melville’s foreboding that a war against black slavery might cement the oppression of the working class with their own blood and rivet the shackles of slavery more firmly than ever” (104-5).

Israel’s wanderings exemplify the attempts of laborers to escape the stifling environments of new forms of labor, particularly the office and the factory. Like Bartleby, however, Israel never finds a suitable home, and, in consequence, both characters endure an estranged experience of displacement. In the conclusion of Israel Potter, the protagonist is continually pushed out of view.
This process first appears in the text in the chapter titled “The Shuttle.” This episode marks Israel’s transition from his service with John Paul Jones, during which he commands a position of influence, back onto the downward trajectory that ultimately finds him indigent in London. As Jones’s ship comes in contact with a British vessel, Israel and his fellow sailors ready themselves to board. Hearing the call to take possession of the other ship, and finding its “long spanker boom” extended over his own deck, Israel “instinctively caught hold of it…”; “…in the valiant excitement of the occasion, he leaped upon the spar, and made a rush for the stranger’s deck, thinking, of course, that he would be immediately followed by the regular boarders” (132). To Israel’s dismay, however, “the sails of the strange ship suddenly filled; she began to glide through the sea,” and Israel, “clinging midway along the boom, soon found himself divided from the Ariel, by a space impossible to be leaped” (132). Upon gaining the deck of the ship, Israel finds himself “mixed in among some two hundred English sailors of a large letter of marque” (132).

Determined not to attract attention to himself, Israel decides that the only means of avoiding suspicion is to play the part of the confidence man: “It was a desperate case; only as desperate a remedy could serve. One thing was sure, he could not hide. Some audacious parade of himself promised the only hope” (133). Potter then sets out to ingratiate himself into one of the many classes of sailors on the ship, claiming to have been among their number from the start of the voyage; however, “[j]ealous with the spirit of class, no social circle would receive him” (134). Despite his hard work and good spirits, Israel find himself “[b]lack-balled out of every club” (136). The officers of the ship, unable to account for Israel’s sudden appearance, do not know what to do with him. Upon the suggestion that Israel may be out of his mind, the officer of the deck retorts, “‘Out of his mind?...He’s out of
all reason; out of all men’s knowledge and memories!” (137). When commanded to lead
Israel away, the master-at-arms responds, “‘He don’t seem to belong anywhere, sir.
Where—where am I to take him?’” “‘Take him out of sight,’” the officer replies, leading to
a pathetic show in which the master-at-arms, “collaring the phantom…led it hither and
thither, not knowing exactly what to do with it” (139). The master-at-arms defends their
meandering across the deck, explaining, “‘I keep leading him about because he has no final
destination’” (140).

That Potter ultimately has no final destination is represented by the failure of his
long-awaited return to America. He finds his native town essentially abandoned; the only
report he receives regarding his family is that at some point they struck out west. Hastily
concluding the narrative, Melville reports that Potter

> was repulsed in efforts, after a pension, by certain caprices of law. His
> scars proved his only medals. He dictated a little book, the record of his
> fortunes. But long ago it faded out of print—himself out of being—his
> name out of memory. He died the same day that the oldest oak in his
> native hills was blown down. (169)

This somber conclusion to what is largely a comical narrative confirms Karcher’s contention
that “…Israel’s fate seems to brand the Revolution as a cruel joke on the class that bore the
brunt of it,” and that the narrative largely serves to “demythicize America’s past” (104-5).
Additionally, Israel Potter is infected with pessimism regarding the possibilities of reform.
In White Jacket, Melville openly campaigns for congressional action to end the practice of
flogging on military vessels, a campaign only partially undercut by his awareness that
“precedents are against it…” (84). In Israel Potter, Melville harbors no illusions that reform
efforts intended to curb exploitative labor practices or rein in imperialist impulses stand any
chance against the precedents of patriotic invocations to consume and to pillage.
Throughout *Israel Potter*, Melville weighs acts of supposed patriotism—including Franklin’s “plain dealing” and Jones’s commitment to destruction—against Potter’s sacrifice and subsequent appeals for support. Just as Franklin’s advisements have no meaning to Potter, so does Potter himself cease to have any meaning to American society once Franklin’s market principles and Jones’s savage acquisitiveness come to dominate the culture. Though Potter’s erasure from American memory is symbolically affected by the disappearance of the chapbook, patriotic celebrations—like the Bunker Hill Monument itself—similarly ensure that individuals like Potter have no place in society. Potter’s return to America coincides with the Fourth of July celebration in Boston. During the carnival-like atmosphere of the celebration, Potter, now an old man, narrowly escaped being run over by a patriotic triumphal car in the procession, flying a brodered banner, inscribed with gilt letters: –

‘BUNKER-HILL.

1775.

GLORY TO THE HEROES THAT FOUGHT!’ (167)
1 For more on how Mathews’s *Behemoth* might have influenced *Moby-Dick*, see Widmer 98-99.

2 A fierce nationalist, Mathews was responsible for coining the term Young America, having first used the expression in proclaiming the necessity of a progressive force in American cultural affairs during a June 1845 speech at New York University (Widmer 103).

3 Philip Deloria writes of “the Tea Party Indians”: “Their…disguises (or claims of disguise) played ambiguously on social boundaries…” enabling them to be “both Indian and non-Indian, repulsive savage and object of colonial desire, representation of social order and disorder…” (31-32). Young describes the Tea Party as “electrifying event known up and down the colonies, which legitimized disguise in ways that cannot be measured” (*Masquerade* 90). For a discussion of the radical qualities of the Tea Party, see Young *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* 99-107.

4 For a defense of the novel as an egalitarian form, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 16. The historical romances set during the Revolution that emerged during this period had a similarly egalitarian impulse: to recapture the lives and historical contributions of ordinary citizens, and, in accordance with the more democratic form of the novel, to appeal to a wide audience including working class men and women (Kammen 146, 148).

5 David Reynolds casts Trumbull’s Potter narrative as “a significant transitional work between the typically preachy early pamphlets and the more bleak, gory later ones… depicting an amoral, deterministic environment in which naturally good people are driven to poverty and crime by circumstances outside their control” (176). Reynolds also asserts that Potter’s narrative is representative of “The sympathetic treatment of criminals [that] would become a central theme of much American crime literature and would feed directly into the resonant ambiguities of major works of Poe and Hawthorne” (176).

6 While it was common for professional writers to transcribe the stories of barely educated, if not outright illiterate, soldiers, Chacko and Kulcsa suggest that Trumbull took a more active role in the shaping of Potter’s narrative, perhaps to help Potter embellish a second pension application after the failure of Potter’s first application, dated Aug. 5, 1823 (388).

7 Melville’s narrator is guilty to some degree of downplaying the evils of slavery when he claims his own oppression: “Certainly the necessities of navies warrant a code for its government more stringent than the law that governs the land; but that code should conform to the spirit of the political institutions of the country that ordains it. It should not convert into slaves some of the citizens of a nation of freemen” (144). There are similar ironies to the narrator’s campaigning to legislative action to outlaw flogging on United States naval vessels. Caroline Karcher takes these moments to offer an implicit criticism of slavery: “Instead of making slavery his single, overriding concern…Melville focused on the oppression and exploitation he had known as a sailor and generalized about slavery by analogy” (2).

8 As Karcher emphasizes, both Pierre and Israel Potter feature “florid introductions that mock the nostalgia for royalty shown by the heirs of the American Revolution and insinuate that the Revolution’s egalitarian ideals do not really animate the nation” (93).

9 Additionally, Melville, like the Clarkes, implicates American memorial culture, represented by the Bunker Hill monument, in the perpetuation of inequality; during a visit from a foreign dignitary, the sailors of the Main-Hold, compelled to climb to the spar-deck to acknowledge him, are described as making an exertion “something like getting to the top of Bunker Hill Monument from the basement” (239). Also, as Michael Kammen notes, popular enthusiasm for the monument was belied by the difficulties that marred its completion; shortages in public subscriptions meant that the monument, whose construction began in 1825, went uncompleted for eighteen years, until 1843 (35).
Melville first announced his intentions for the work in a journal entry written while attending to the arrangements for *Redburn* in Britain. The idea gestated for years before he proposed the book to George Putnam (Bezanson 174-75).

Franklin criticizes the folly of Potter’s high heels—“Don’t you know that it’s both wasting leather and endangering your limbs, to wear such high heels?”—before recognizing that Potter’s “‘high heels, instead of being idle vanities, seem to be full of meaning’” (40). The incident is notable not only for the wordplay in which Franklin regularly engages but also because, prior to learning the secret of Israel’s boots, Franklin deems the topic of ostentatious boots ripe for education; “‘I have thought at my first leisure, to write a pamphlet against that very abuse’” (40). Before Potter makes his exit to return to England, Franklin assures him: “‘I’ll draw up a paper on false-heels one of these days, and send it to a private reading, at the Institute’” (64). The result is that Franklin comes across as a didactic figure, as well as an opportunist who will seize any pretense to publish.

One month previous to *Israel Potter*’s debut, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* featured his “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs.” Melville’s stories “Bartleby” (November-December 1853) and “The Encantadas” (March-May 1854) had previously appeared in the pages of *Putnam’s*, whose August, 1854 edition featured both the second installment of *Israel Potter* and “The Lightning-Rod Man.”

Gilmore reads Melville’s emphasis on artisan production as a way of preserving personalized relationships between author and reader: “The artisan impresses his personal stamp upon the product of his labor, which is commonly made according to the specifications of the customer. With the commodity the buyer loses his active role in production; he has contributed nothing of himself to the object he purchases” (121). Other critics likewise have related the visibility of the author within the text to theories of labor. As Cindy Weinstein explains, “A heightened anxiety about labor in general, due to foundational changes in the structure and meaning of work, helped to construct an aesthetic paradigm that demanded the invisibility of literary labor and of the laborer as well” (204). She continues, “Whereas working-class analyses of work focused primarily on improving conditions of labor, debates within the middle class seemed to stress the construction and maintenance of a new temporal and geographical space called ‘recreation’ or ‘leisure’” (206).
On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass took the stage of Corinthian Hall in Rochester. Ostensibly, Douglass’s speech was to be a celebration of “the great principles of justice and freedom” which are “the cornerstone of the national super-structure…. ” (“July Fourth” 2:187). Following a self-deprecating introduction, Douglass led the assembly of some five or six hundred individuals through a recitation of the nation’s Revolutionary history: “Feeling themselves harshly and unjustly treated…your fathers, like men of honesty, and men of spirit, earnestly sought redress. They petitioned and remonstrated…. This, however, did not answer the purpose. They saw themselves treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn. Yet they persevered. They were not the men to look back” (2:184). Determined to dissolve their connection to the British Crown, “your fathers made good that resolution. They succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success” (2:185).

Having recounted this well-known story, Douglass reached a pivotal moment in his speech. “We have to do with the past,” he acknowledged, “only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future” (2:188). In the tradition of the July Fourth oration, he advised his auditors to cleave to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence: “The principles
contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost” (2:185). The principles of the Declaration—equality, liberty, and freedom for the pursuit of happiness—would aid the nation in navigating the hazards now visible “[f]rom the round top of your ship of state…” (2:185).

Yet the subject that he had adopted for his speech, as he informed his “fellow citizens, was “American slavery.” “I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave’s point of view,” he continued (2:190). From the slave’s perspective, then, in what way could the history of America’s declaration of independence and revolution against the British be “useful”? Standing upon that stage in Rochester, “identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine,” Douglass thundered, “I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July!” (2:190).

Each Fourth of July, all around were signs of declension, yet, depending upon one’s perspective on slavery, the forms of apostasy differed. George Fitzhugh, the Virginia politician, disavowed the equality principle of the Declaration, claiming that “Men are not born entitled to equal rights!” (qtd. in Wilentz Rise 729). On the opposite end of the spectrum, at an antislavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts on July 4th, 1854,” William Lloyd Garrison famously burned a copy of the Constitution, a document that he deemed pro-slavery (Reynolds Whitman 137). Despite these differences, both sides asserted a Revolutionary inheritance—a paradox that inspired Douglass to warn his Rochester audience, “The cause of liberty may be stabbed by the men who glory in the deeds of your fathers” (2:184).
The uproar over abolitionism saw a return of the symbolic acts of violence, particularly tarring and feathering, that accompanied the run up to revolution—and the majority of that violence was directed at abolitionists. As Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux”—republished in 1852—provides evidence, tarring and feathering retained its suggestive power in branding certain individuals or actions un-American. Just as the tar pot became an important tool of protest during the Stamp Act controversy, so too did it prove its efficacy during the abolitionist controversies in Boston during the early nineteenth century. According to Alfred Young, much of Boston society, including the heirs of those who engineered the Sons of Liberty protests, became decidedly hostile toward abolitionists. In August of 1835, the mayor of Boston, Harrison Gray Otis—the nephew of James Otis, the Revolutionary pamphleteer (and, incidentally, an abolitionist)—sneeringly referred to the city’s antislavery activists as “a revolutionary society” (qtd. in Young Shoemaker 153). When George Thompson, a British abolitionist, passed through Boston, anti-abolitionist forces circulated a handbill promising a reward to those who brought “that foreign scoundrel [to] the tar kettle” (qtd. in Young 153). Then, in October, Garrison was dragged through the streets by a mob comprised of “‘gentlemen of property and standing’” (qtd. in Young 153). By framing the story of Garrison’s mobbing as an orderly and respectable action, anti-abolitionists branded their opponents as a disordered threat to the stability of the nation.

Similarly, elsewhere around the nation, threats of Revolution-inspired violence were directed at abolitionist activists and editors, including Elijah P. Lovejoy, who ran an abolitionist press first in St. Louis and later in Alton, Illinois. Following the burning to death of another African American by a St. Louis mob, Lovejoy challenged his antagonists: “You
may burn me at the stake as they did McIntosh at St. Louis; or you may tar and feather me, or
throw me into the Mississippi as you have often threatened to do; but you cannot disgrace
me” (qtd. in Reynolds Brown 63). Lovejoy’s defiance was matched by other victims of
violence; Garrison, for instance, denounced his mobbing in The Liberator by situating the
birth of his anti-slavery movement “within sight of Bunker Hill and in the birthplace of
liberty” (qtd. in Young Shoemaker 153). Those in favor of abolition and African American
rights were equally capable of seizing upon the “quintessentially American form of ritualistic
violence” of tarring and feathering as a means of branding their opponents as in league with
tyranny; in some cases, as during the campaign to integrate Boston’s common schools,
tarring and feathering even served in “constructing a way to reaffirm blacks’ status as
Americans” (Moss 221). Nevertheless, violence—whether tarring and feathering or rioting
of the sort that led to Lovejoy’s death in November 1837—predominantly marked
abolitionist activity as Tory or anti-American.

What, then, in light of antiabolitionist violence, was the usefulness of the Revolution
for antislavery advocates? Through their compromises with the Slave Power, Northern
congressman and politicians proved their unwillingness to follow the example of their fathers
and assert the right of resistance. An extremely popular target of abolitionist ire was Daniel
Webster. Webster, whose speeches from Bunker Hill in 1825 and 1843 were taken as
legendary statements of patriotism, had earlier garnered the criticism of Democrats for his
support for internal improvements. In light of his celebration of the Compromise of 1850
and the Fugitive Slave Law as a saving measure, a younger generation of antislavery activists
who deemed the “Compromise” a capitulation declared the elder statesman irrelevant. As
Eric Sundquist writes, “In courting the attacks of Emerson (who would caricature
Webster...as ‘the head of the slavery party’ in the United States), Parker, and others, Webster illustrated the crisis that convulsed the Union and made appeals to the spirit of the Revolution ironic, if not, as Emerson said of the Fugitive Slave Law, ‘suicidal’” (113).

In the midst of the abolitionist struggle, nineteenth-century Jeremias denounce the national sin of slavery by contrasting the heroism of America’s revolutionaries with the cowardice of those who caved in to the demands of the Slave Power. Following the rendition of the fugitive Anthony Burns in 1854, abolitionists denounced the complicity of the common American in perpetuating the evils of slavery. Following the Burns affair, during which the captured man was marched through the crowded streets of Boston and shipped back to bondage in Virginia, orators and artists with anti-slavery leanings offered a ringing rebuke. In “A Boston Ballad” (one of the untitled poems published in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass), Walt Whitman refashioned the public’s non-intervention in Burns’s rendition as a reinstallation of British tyranny; while envisioning a macabre propping up of the late King George’s skeleton upon a throne, he addressed the monarch: “You have got your revenge, old buster—the crown is come to its own, and more than its own” (745).

Abolitionists around Boston seethed. At the same antislavery meeting at which Garrison torched the Constitution, Henry David Thoreau ridiculed those who stood idly by as Burns was marched back into slavery. As Thoreau reminded his audience, Burns was not the first fugitive that Bostonians were content to give over to the Slave Power; some three years earlier Thomas Sims faced a similar fate. Sims, too, was “a perfectly innocent man, and one whom they knew to be innocent”; yet the people of Boston acquiesced to the authorities that returned him to slavery. Then, “just a week” later, in Concord—the site of the first skirmish against the British—the people “caused the bells to be rung and the cannons to be fired, to
celebrate their liberty—and the courage and love of liberty of their ancestors who fought at
the bridge” (184). What these revelers failed to realize, Thoreau asserted, was that the
Fugitive Slave Law, which required that all Americans assist in returning escaped slaves to
bondage, had extinguished their liberty. “So some of my townsmen took the liberty to ring
and fire,” Thoreau railed; “that was the extent of their freedom; and when the sound of the
bells died away, their liberty died away also; when the powder was all expended, their liberty
went off with the smoke” (184). By circumscribing the avenues of permissible thought and
action, the Congress had acted tyrannically, and, unlike their Revolutionary forebears,
Americans in large part responded with silence. Those who understood the extent of the
betrayal should be overcome with grief, not joy: “Every humane and intelligent inhabitant of
Concord, when he or she heard those bells and those cannons, thought not with pride of the
events of the 19th of April, 1775, but with shame of the events of the 12th of April, 1851”
(184).

Exposing such ironies, Douglass maintained during his Rochester oration, was
perhaps the most effective weapon of the abolitionist: “At a time like this,” he declared,
“scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed” (2:192). Rather than celebrate unity
and equality, Douglass concluded, it would be better to thunder down judgment regarding the
disparity between American ideals and their failed execution. Throughout his oration,
Douglass rhetorically distinguished between his audience of white citizens and blacks like
himself who were deprived of the rights of citizenship. The story of the Revolution, he
addressed his audience, had meaning for “you” as it had for “your fathers”; for himself, and
for American slaves, however, the supposedly glorious anniversary of the Declaration took
on new meanings:
What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. (emphasis added, 2:192).

In its structure, Douglass’s oration replicated that of the jeremiad, a form of religious oratory that, while denouncing the wayward habits of the present, also served (as Sacvan Bercovitch has shown) to countenance such missteps by trumpeting the narrative of America’s divinely-ordained progress. Douglass concluded his speech with the claim that, “notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country” (2:203). “There are forces in operation,” he continued, “which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery” (2:203). Among these he identified “‘the Declaration of Independence,’ the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions,” as well as “the obvious tendencies of the age” (2:203). “No nation,” Douglass concluded (most likely with an eye toward Britain, which outlawed slavery in 1833), “can now shut itself up from the surrounding world and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference” (2:203). With these thoughts in mind, Douglass could proclaim, “‘The arm of the Lord is not shortened,’ and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope” (2:203).

Yet, as William Andrews explains, the total effect of Douglass’s oration was different than the traditional jeremiad in that it primarily contained an assertion of difference: Douglass “could not identify himself with the chosen people of the American jeremiad, but rather with the captive people of Psalm 137” (168); “It was no longer the affinity but ‘the
disparity between us’ that he hammered home to his…audience” (168). It was fitting, then, that Douglass’s speech fell on the Fifth of July rather than the Fourth; since the 1840s, many African Americans had chosen the Fifth as the day on which they would “mark the nation’s birthday” (Kammen 53).

Torn between belief in the assertions of equality in the Declaration and anger at their own “illegitimate” status within the nation, African Americans split over whether or not to claim the Revolutionary struggle as their own. Throughout the antebellum period, free blacks and fugitive slaves wrestled with what Hillary J. Moss describes as the “rhetorical ambiguity (or, in more positive terms, flexibility) of the American Revolution as a symbol of division and unity among the free black community” (240). Douglass and those who claimed leadership within the abolitionist campaign faced difficult choices as to how closely to align themselves with the United States’ system of government, with the ideals that supposedly governed the nation’s institutions, and, by extension, with the nation’s history. Would the campaign be most effective if its spokesmen positioned themselves in opposition to white society, decrying the hypocrisy of the Declaration of Independence and disavowing the Revolutionary past? Or could that past be appropriated in such a manner as to pledge a common cause with that society, and thereby establish a case for the rights that African Americans had been denied? And in embracing the Revolution and the rights enumerated in the Declaration, would blacks be free to claim the right to violent revolt?

By emphasizing disparities between the rights of whites and blacks, Douglass echoed black activists who proclaimed the necessity of a decisive break between blacks and American society. Foremost among these was Martin Delany, who began to promote emigration as the best means of securing freedom for black Americans. Delany had been
Douglass’s co-editor at The North Star, the abolitionist newspaper that the pair, along with the Boston-born publisher William Cooper Nell, founded in Rochester in 1847. Delany’s advocacy of emigration emerged out of a prolonged debate within the African American community regarding the proper means of achieving black elevation, the role of whites in aiding that cause, and the proper response to such outrages as the Fugitive Slave Law. “In his championing of black emigration,” Robert Levine writes, “Delany emphasizes the duplicity and malevolence of white racist culture in the United States, and the black disempowerment that inevitably results from such racism” (Delany 94). The extent of blacks’ disempowerment, Delany believed, was such that “Even free blacks…are in effect slaves, not only because the Fugitive Slave Law poses an imminent threat to all Northern blacks but also because blacks lack access to legal, social, and political forms of power” (94).

Fusing black nationalism with the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, Delany devised a plan for black expatriation to Central and South America to create a nation where African Americans could secure their own particular destiny.

Prior to concluding that American institutions were beyond reforming, Delany himself invoked the Revolution in justifying violent resistance to tyranny. Explaining that he would take violent action to save his family from the danger posed by slave catchers, Delany asserted: “Whatever ideas of liberty I may have, have been received from reading the lives of your revolutionary fathers. I have therein learned that a man has a right to defend his castle with his life, even unto the taking of life” (qtd. in Levine Delany 61). Delany’s emigrationist stance entailed a break with both America’s past and its future. Whereas Delany disavowed any revolutionary prospects for African Americans within the United States, others within the abolitionist movement embraced the Revolution as a model of the violent response
necessary to end slavery in America. In his speech at Framingham, Thoreau issued a
warning to his auditors: “It is not an era of repose. We have used all our inherited freedom.
If we would save our lives, we must fight for them” (193). Theodore Parker cautioned
against compromise; by conciliating the South rather than resisting the pernicious spread of
slavery, he argued, American statesman had only set the stage for more horrendous violence:
“the question is, not if slavery is to cease, and soon to cease, but shall it end as it ended in
Massachusetts, in New Hampshire, in Pennsylvania, in New York, or shall it end as in San
Domingo? Follow the counsel of Mr. Webster—it will end in fire and blood” (qtd. in
Sundquist 113). While defenders of slavery raised the specter of St. Domingo as a reason to
deprive African Americans of freedom, Parker referenced the bloody Haitian revolution to
illustrate the consequences of failing to rid the nation of the scourge of slavery—a message
akin to that of Melville’s novella of slave rebellion, “Benito Cereno” (1855).

Douglass, long under the sway of Garrisonian nonviolence, publicly rejected violence
as a viable response to oppression. Occasionally, however, he would give voice—either in
print or during one of his many anti-slavery speeches—to more violent impulses; for
example, in his first autobiography, Douglass seizes upon his violent struggle with the slave
driver, Covey, as “the turning point in my career as a slave,” and as “a glorious resurrection,
from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (160). In his 1852 oration, Douglass did
not dwell on the violence of the Revolutionary generation; yet, following the continued
outrages perpetrated under the Fugitive Slave Law, Douglass would adopt the American
revolutionaries as a model for violent resistance to oppression. When one of the federal
marshals overseeing Anthony Burns’s detention in Boston was killed during a failed rescue
attempt led by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Douglass countenanced violence in a piece
published in his newspaper entitled “Is it right and wise to kill a kidnapper?” In summarizing the affair for his readers, Douglass wrote, “The streets of Boston in sight of Bunker Hill Monument, have been stained with the warm blood of a man in the act of perpetrating the most atrocious robbery which one man can possibly commit upon another—even the wrestling from him his very person and natural powers” (2:284). The great crime, Douglass asserted, was not that which led to the death of the marshal (who, Douglass sneeringly noted, was generally employed as a “truckman”), but rather the dead man’s complicity in depriving Burns of his liberty. When a rival newspaper in Rochester condemned Higginson and his comrades and sentimentalized the suffering of the marshal’s orphaned children, Douglass issued a retort once again steeped in irony:

For a white man to defend his friend unto blood is praiseworthy, but for a black man to do precisely the same thing is crime. It was glorious for Patrick Henry to say, “Give me liberty or give me death!” It was glorious for Americans to drench the soil, and crimson the sea with blood, to escape the payment of three-penny tax upon tea; but it is crime to shoot down a monster in defence of the liberty of a black man and to save him from bondage “one hour of which (in the language of Jefferson) is worse than ages of that which our fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.” Until Mr. Mann is willing to be a slave—until he is ready to admit that human legislation can rightfully reduce him to slavery, by a simple vote—until he ceases to glory in the deeds of Hancock, Adams, and Warren—and ceases to look with pride and patriotic admiration upon the somber pile at Bunker Hill, where the blood of the oppressor was poured out in torrents making thousands of widows and orphans, it does not look graceful in him to brand as murderers those that killed the atrocious Truckman who attempted to play the blood-hound on the track of the poor, defenceless BURNS. (2:288-89)

In this remarkable passage, Douglass invokes the Revolution for a multitude of rhetorical purposes. On the one hand, he trivializes the Revolution by pointing out, as did many abolitionists, that the oppression that the revolutionaries suffered at the hands of the British was trifling in comparison to that endured by blacks under slavery. Furthermore, by quoting Jefferson’s admission to the evils of slavery—a system that Jefferson himself was complicit
in—Douglass reveals the hypocrisy of those who took part in, or celebrate, America’s independence while denying freedom to African Americans. Douglass’s response is still informed by Garrison’s insistence on moral suasion; his revolutionary exemplars are mainly statesmen and, like Patrick Henry, powerful orators. Yet his attack on Mann, the rival editor, rests on the premise that Mann’s denunciation of the marshal’s killers only holds when one has already abandoned any claim to the legacy of the Revolution. By implication, Douglass suggests that a faithful use of the Revolutionary example would be to continue to seek “the blood of the oppressor”—the oppressors in this case being those who would “play the bloodhound” and hound the slave. In this piece, Douglass is content to merely illustrate the irony that “For a white man to defend his friend unto blood is praiseworthy, but for a black man to do precisely the same thing is crime.” Yet Douglass would soon offer his own vision of black violence inspired by the Revolution. He likely found inspiration in a pamphlet entitled “Service of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812” (1851).

The frontispiece of William Cooper Nell’s The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution (1855) depicts the Boston Massacre of 1770. Like Paul Revere’s famous engraving of the Massacre, the illustration reveals a line of British troops arrayed on the right side of the image, their muskets leveled. Across a cloud of smoke, on the left side of the image, stands the remnant of a line of colonial protestors, some of whom have crumpled to the ground. In Revere’s version of the image, the bodies of the fallen spurt blood and lie in pools of gore, while the Custom House in the background has been rechristened “Butcher’s Hall.” Though less bloody, the 1855 image is no less provocative, for prominent in the foreground lies the broken—and black—body of Crispus Attucks. As its caption suggests,
this image of “the First Martyr of the American Revolution”—like the collection as a whole—offers a radically new story of the American Revolution: one that celebrates the vital role of African Americans in the winning of independence.

During the decade preceding the publication of Colored Patriots, Nell had committed his energies to a number of projects that both literally and symbolically laid the foundation for African American citizenship. In 1847, he joined Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany in Rochester, New York, to see the first issue of The North Star through the press. With Nell as publisher and Delany and Douglass sharing editorial duties, The North Star was a project “under the complete control and direction of the immediate victims of slavery and oppression.” A successful newspaper would provide powerful testimony for the capabilities of African Americans: “In the grand struggle for liberty and equality now waging,” Douglass wrote in the inaugural issue, “it is meet, right and essential that there should arise in our ranks authors and editors, as well as orators, for it is in these capacities that the most permanent good can be rendered to our cause” (“Our Paper” 1:281). The project of The North Star was rooted in a belief that Delany would later deny: that African Americans could claim freedom and equality by first gaining access to “legal, social, and political forms of power” (Levine Delany 94). Believing that education could provide access to such positions of power and influence, Nell took a prominent role in the effort to integrate Boston’s common schools (Moss 222).

Even as he focused on more pragmatic endeavors, Nell also struggled to advance black Americans’ claims to the more symbolic aspects of American identity. In March 1850, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Massacre, Nell petitioned the state legislature for funds to erect a statue of Crispus Attucks in front of the Old State House. As he angrily
recorded in the pages of *Colored Patriots*—the literary component of his memorial project—the application was denied: “[L]et it be recorded,” he wrote, that “the same session of the Legislature which had refused the ATTUCKS monument, granted one to ISAAC DAVIS, of Concord. Both were promoters of the American Revolution, but one was white, the other was *black*; and this is the only solution to the problem *why* justice was not fairly meted out” (18).

Clearly, then, justice was a function of history and memory—and memory was inflected by color. As pro- and anti-slavery activists memorialized the Revolution in conflicting fashion, so the Revolution gained an increasingly prominent role in black “civic culture.” Among the possible causes of this development, Hilary J. Moss explains, were “the seventy-fifth anniversary of American independence; whites’ desire to reclaim national unity in the midst of increasing sectional tensions; and abolitionists’ attempts, in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Law, to recast the Revolution as an epic conflict between liberty and slavery” (237).³ By invigorating the incidents and images of African American participation in the Revolution, Nell sought to achieve the unfulfilled egalitarian promises of the Declaration of Independence.

First in his 1851 pamphlet “Service of Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812,” then in the expanded *Colored Patriots*, Nell sought to provide “a narration of those military services which are generally conceded as passports to the honorable and lasting notice of Americans” (10). Nell’s pamphlet was preceded in this endeavor by John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Black Men of the American Revolution and War of 1812,” published in *The National Era* on July 19, 1847 (Kammen 53). The black soldiers of the Revolution, Whittier wrote, “have had no historian.”

With here and there an exception, they have all passed away; and only some faint tradition of their campaigns under Washington and Greene and
Lafayette, and of their cruisings under Decatur and Barry, lingers among their descendents. Yet enough is known to show that the free colored men of the United States bore their full proportion of the sacrifices and trials of the Revolutionary War. (406-7).

Whittier presented his piece as a response to a question posed at a meeting of the American Colonization Society: “‘What right, I demand…have the children of Africa to a homestead in the white man’s country?’” (qtd. in Whittier 415). As Whittier noted, the figure of the black Revolutionary soldier was integral to reform efforts; for example, their service had been invoked in the New York state constitutional convention of 1821 on the matter of extending suffrage to black Americans (409).

Whittier’s piece—particularly his response to the Colonization Society—would itself become adapted into further attempts to gain rights for black Americans. Most notably, Whittier’s celebration of blacks’ revolutionary service was incorporated into a “memorial” by the nation’s first black attorney, the Oberlin-educated John Mercer Langston. The memorial, which illustrates the complex manner in which various racial and ethnic groups within America jockeyed for social distinction and political empowerment, reads:

> “Their right,” (colored Americans) in the truthful language of John G. Whittier, “like that of their white fellow-citizens, dates back to the dread arbitrament of war. Their bones whiten every stricken field of the Revolution; their feet tracked with blood the snows of Jersey; their toil built up every fortification south of the Potomac; they shared the famine and nakedness of Valley Forge, and the pestilential horrors of the old Jersey prison ship.” Have we, then, no claim to an equal participation in the blessings which have “grown out of the national independence,” which we fought to establish? Is it right, is it just, is it generous, is it magnanimous, to withhold from us these blessings and “starve our patriotism”? What foreigner, what Irish or German emigrant, has ever given such evidences of deep devotion to your government? And yet, you have taken pains to make a special arrangement by which, in due time, they are to enter upon the full enjoyment of citizenship. To this arrangement we would not object. We simply ask that we, who have given such strong and significant proofs of our love of this country and its laws, be clothed in the livery of free and independent citizenship. (qtd. in Nell 339-40)
Langston’s testimonial in turn became the basis for a proposed equal suffrage amendment submitted to the Ohio State Senate by Norton S. Townshend (Nell 336-37). Befitting the consubstantiating strategy of his appeal, Langston eschews any mention of African American resistance. Whittier, on the other hand, echoes Parker’s warning in asking: “Is it just, is it magnanimous, is it safe, even…to cast their hearts out of the treasury of the Republic, and to convert them, by political disenfranchisement and social oppression, into enemies?” (emphasis added, 416).

The achievements of African American soldiers, Nell concurs, have been “veiled from the public eye…” (10). To bring their stories before the public eye and into the nation’s collective consciousness, Nell not only recorded those stories but also traced the patterns of representation and appropriation of black revolutionary figures. For example, Nell devotes a section of his text to identifying the black soldier seen accompanying Washington in popular artistic depictions of the fateful Delaware crossing. “In the engravings of Washington crossing the Delaware,” he writes, “…a colored soldier is seen, on horseback, quite prominent, near the Commander-in-Chief—the same figure that, in other sketches, is seen pulling the stroke oar in that memorable crossing” (198). These images correspond closely to Thomas Sully’s painting The Passage of the Delaware (1819) and Emanuel Leutze’s Washington Crossing the Delaware (1850), respectively, two works of art that, thanks to popular exhibitions and widely circulated prints from engravings, helped spread the story of black revolutionaries.5

As a compendium of materials gleaned from newspapers, histories, short fiction, and innumerable other sources, Nell’s text presented the collected evidence of slaves’ and free blacks’ revolutionary activity on behalf of the Americans. As a historical work, Nell’s
collection proved a formidable task, not only due to the scant remaining evidence of black revolutionaries, but also due to the thorny historical truth that, to the extent that they sided with either the British or the Americans, the majority of African Americans aligned themselves against the Americans. The British famously (following Lord Dunmore’s proclamation of November 1775) offered asylum to any blacks who could reach their lines. The exodus of slaves from Southern plantations following Dunmore’s decree has been described by one historian as “the greatest slave rebellion in American history” (Nash 231).

Nell’s volume is not without evidence of African Americans’ disposition toward the British during the Revolution—and the physical threat that they posed to their white owners both at that time and since. Nell reproduces a story by Lydia Maria Child, “The Black Saxons,” in which a group of slaves, already committed to joining the British, debate whether or not to kill their masters when the British land in the Carolinas (247-253). Even in this context, however, Child highlights the literal debate between the slaves as a means of illustrating their capabilities for citizenship; despite its emotionality, the disagreement between the slaves is ordered and controlled, as illustrated by its initiation by a virtual chairman:

“When we had our last meeting,” said he, “I suppose most all of you know, that we all concluded it was best for to join the British, if so be we could get a good chance. But we didn’t all agree about our masters. Some thought we should never be able to keep our freedom, without we killed our masters in the first place; others didn’t like the thoughts of that; so we agreed to have another meeting to talk about it. And now, boys, if the British land here in Caroliny, What shall we do with our masters?” (248)

Child simultaneously represents slaves negotiating a democracy and giving voice to rebellious opinion. This complex union of leadership and resistance is best represented by a mulatto character, exhibiting the fresh wounds of the lash, whom the slave owner (who has
donned a black mask and disguise to witness the meeting) recognizes as the son of one of his
neighbors:

“Call him a good master, if ye like!” said the bleeding youth, with a bitter
sneer in his look and tone. “I curse the word. The white men tell us God
made them our masters; I say, it was the Devil. When they don’t cut up the
backs that bear their burdens, when they throw us enough of the grain we
have raised to keep us strong for another harvest, when they forbear to
shoot the limbs that toil to make them rich, they are fools who call them
good masters. Why should they sleep on soft beds, under silken curtains,
while we, whose labor bought it all, lie on the floor at the threshold, or
miserably coiled up in the dirt of our own cabins? Why should I clothe my
master in broadcloth and fine linen, when he knows, and I know, that he is
my own brother? and I, meanwhile, have only this coarse rag to cover my
aching shoulders?” He kicked the garment scornfully, and added, “Down
on your knees, if ye like, and thank them that ye are not flogged and shot.
Of me they’ll learn another lesson!” (250-51)

In the end, democracy and mercy prevail: “After various scenes of fiery indignation, gentle
expostulation, and boisterous mirth, it was finally decided, by a considerable majority, that in
case the British landed, they would take their freedom without murdering their masters; not a
few, however, went away in a wrathful mood, muttering curses deep” (252). Thus, Child’s
story negotiates a difficult balance of invoking the possibility of black resistance while
refusing to represent physical violence. Nevertheless, what Child’s story illustrates, most
centrally, is a point made more recently by the historian Simon Schama:

Whether they opted for the Patriot or for the loyalist side, many of the
blacks, illiterate or not, knew exactly what they were doing, even if they
could never have anticipated the magnitude of the perils, misfortunes and
deceits that would result from their decision. Often, their choice was
determined by a judgment of whether, sooner or later, a free America
would be forced to honor the Declaration of Independence’s principle that
the birthright of all men was liberty and equality; or whether…fine-
sounding promises were likely to be indefinitely deferred. (11)

Indeed, African Americans were agents and actors in the Revolution. As Schama contends,

“The story of this mass flight [by slaves toward the security of the British]…forces
[a]…rethinking of the war as involving, at its core, a third party” (9). Though Schama
himself oversimplifies the number of “parties” engaged in the Revolution, his point holds that a more accurate depiction of the Revolution does not conform to the narrative of two conflicting parties but instead reveals a multitude of parties holding distinct but sometimes intersecting agendas. Though historical accuracy and cultural authority need not correspond, it is instructive to note that, in cases such as Child’s short story, Revolutionary fictions had the potential of correcting the conventional wisdom regarding the Revolution and thus opening up the possibility for asserting the radical legacy of that struggle.

Nell provides copious examples of black Revolutionaries who fought alongside the Americans, particularly at Bunker Hill, where some 150 African American soldiers offered deadly resistance to the British assault (Nash 228). In exchange for their service, some of these soldiers received their freedom, and, in some cases, even earned a military pension. Yet many more African Americans were variously barred from, coerced into, or received scant rewards for their service in the Continental army (Royster 241). For every Titus Coburn (21) who garnered a pension, there was a story similar to that narrated to Nell by Theodore Parker:

Rev. Theodore Parker gives the following anecdote of a Massachusetts sea-captain. He commanded a small brig, which plied between Carolina and the Gulf States. “One day, at Charleston,” said he, “a man came and brought to me an old negro slave. He was very old, and had fought in the Revolution, and been very distinguished for bravery and other soldierly qualities. If he had not been a negro, he would have become a Captain, at least, perhaps a Colonel. But, in his age, his master found no use for him, and said that he could not afford to keep him. He asked me to take the Revolutionary soldier, carry him South and sell him. I carried him,” said the man, “to Mobile, and tried to get as good and kind a master for him as I could, for I didn't like to sell a man that had fought for his country. I sold the old Revolutionary soldier for a hundred dollars to a citizen of Mobile, who raised poultry, and he set him to attend a hen-coop.” (243-44)

Nell devoted each chapter of his text to a different state, retelling the Revolutionary exploits of its black citizens—and lamenting the particular forms of racial inequality that endured in
each state. For instance, upon concluding his account of Washington’s Delaware crossing, Nell decries the injustice of Delaware state laws that limit the mobility of black citizens: “Delaware is yet disgraced by a statute forbidding the immigration of free colored persons. Even her own native-born colored citizens, on absenting themselves, cannot return to the State without being liable to fines and imprisonment” (199). Through juxtaposition of the heroic works of black revolutionaries and the disgrace of continuing racial discrimination, Nell tempers his praise of the Revolution’s success. Though their service should have earned them not only freedom but citizenship and all of its privileges, many black soldiers found themselves and their posterity unrewarded for their sacrifice.

Unrelenting injustice necessarily influenced the self-presentation strategies of African American activists and artists. Particularly in the wake of “legislative and legal outrages like the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott decision,” Andrews writes, the political realities of the “perverted northern democracy” “seemed to preclude the consubstantiating rhetorical strategy of traditional black autobiography” (174, 176, 174). As Andrews illustrates, black autobiography prior to 1850 sought to reveal the “degree to which blacks identified with American religious, political, and moral ideals”; narratives were structured around the autobiographer’s “quest for self-realization and fulfillment [which] requires that he gain admission into the charmed circle of an American identity” (174-75). These narratives, in other words, rhetorically enacted black elevation:

Though the nation may fail to…afford him its full respect and protection as a citizen, the black autobiographer before 1850 usually rests his case for personhood and justice on proof that he was no longer stranger to, but in all essential ways the personification of, the principles (though not the current application) of the New Testament and the Declaration of Independence.

(176)
Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) served just such a purpose; the text “implied that the writing of autobiography was itself to be understood as an act of self-liberation, part of the continuum of events narrated in the text” (103-4). However, as white officials in the state and federal congresses continued to reject their claims to equality as provided by the Declaration, African American texts took on a more subversive or aggressive tone. As Andrews writes of Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), “The rebellious shadow comes to the fore in Douglass only when all his gods and fathers fail and he must become his own self-authorizing presence in a world bereft of legitimate structure or sanction” (229).

That the history of the Revolution could serve as a symbol of division was best emblematized in the first African American novel, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), a novel that prominently featured “a negro sale, at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder!” (88). By adapting the scandalous history of Jefferson’s mixed-race children, Brown drew a stark contrast between the rhetoric and policy of one of the Founding Fathers. “But,” he continued, “sad to say, Jefferson is not the only American statesman who has spoken high-sounding words in favor of freedom, and then left his own children to die slaves” (158). Though Jefferson’s notorious slave offspring became a dominant narrative, other Founders came under attack for their vexed record on slavery. Though George Washington famously freed his slaves in his will, the uncertain destinies of those slaves belied his commitment to abolition. Nell records the stories of several of Washington’s former slaves, among them Hamet, who was rewarded for his service in the
Revolution with a military pension, “a perfect recollection of his massa, and missus Washington…a lock of the General’s hair, and his (the General’s) service sword” (135). On the other hand, however, Nell also reproduced stories of a less favorable character. First, a man on a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon is guided to Washington’s grave by a former slave who confesses that his family, sold off through the slave trade, is entirely lost and unknown to him. Later, a Rochester woman describes an encounter with the son of Washington’s house slave, himself a fugitive, during his attempted flight to Canada (221-22). Of this latter figure, Nell’s source writes (in language that closely parallels a passage from the slave narrative of Lewis and Milton Clarke), “‘True is it, that if this fugitive should stand on the spot where Warren fell—should he clasp the monument at Bunker’s Hill—should he flee to the home of John Hancock—even there, the slaveholder may claim him as his chattel slave’” (223). This realization gives rise to a remarkable conclusion: “‘Let us, then, shed no more tears at the tomb of Washington at Mt. Vernon—let us no more boast of liberty—let us break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free!’” (223). As this comment suggests, the United States’ proud Revolutionary legacy could in fact be a yoke binding the nation to the sin of slavery. Slipping the yoke of slavery would entail an action akin to Garrison’s burning the founding documents of the nation: disavowing the past to save the future.

In his speech on July 5th, 1852, Douglass intoned that “the Declaration of Independence is the ringbolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny….” (“July Fourth” 185). As James Colaiaco explains, Douglass’s metaphor—though superficially similar to the yoke comment above—serves a considerably different purpose: Douglass “transmuted a symbol of oppression—a bolt with a ring attached for fitting a rope to it—into a symbol of liberation. The Declaration, the nation’s ‘ring-bolt,’ will smash the chains of the slaves. It is an
abolition tract that bound the nation to certain liberal ideals” (42). Whereas one member of the abolitionist camp could configure an icon of the Revolution (Washington, or his tomb at Mount Vernon) as an anchor weighing down attempts at reform, Douglass defines another (the Declaration) as a tool of liberation. Thus we find Douglass at odds not only with those who would claim the Revolution as pro-slavery, but also with those who would disavow it for much the same reason. Like the reformers covered in previous chapters, Douglass suggests that the liberating work of the Revolution remained unfinished.

Similarly, Nell reveals an unshakable faith that the images of black revolutionaries can be mobilized for the benefit of the African American community. In addition to the frontispiece illustration of Crispus Attucks, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution features an image of Peter Salem, “the Colored American, at Bunker Hill” (21). Salem had already secured a place in Revolutionary memory. Like Attucks, Salem was remembered for a particular action—in his case, for killing British Major John Pitcairn on Bunker Hill (Nash 225):

Swett, in his “Sketches of Bunker Hill Battle,” alludes to the presence of a colored man in that fight. He says:— "Major Pitcairn caused the first effusion of blood at Lexington. …He appeared at Bunker Hill, and, says the historian, “Among those who mounted the works was the gallant Major Pitcairn, who exultingly cried out, “The day is ours!” when a black soldier named SALEM shot him through, and he fell. His agonized son received him in his arms, and tenderly bore him to the boats.” A contribution was made in the army for the colored soldier, and he was presented to Washington as having performed this feat.” (21)

Salem’s place in the battle had also been memorialized in John Trumbull’s Battle of Bunker Hill (1786). Like the images of Washington’s crossing, Trumbull’s depiction of the Bunker Hill fight was widely circulated through prints and engravings. As Nell notes, however, Salem’s standing within these images was not always secure: “In some engravings of the
battle, this colored soldier occupies a prominent position; but in more recent editions, his figure is *non est inventus*. A significant, but inglorious omission” (21).

Where Salem’s image is secure, Nell asserts, and where his “presence is manifest,” is in forms controlled by, and demonstrating the credit of, African Americans: namely, on bills issued by “the Monumental Bank, Charlestown, and Freeman’s Bank, Boston” (21).

Demonstrating their economic power was another way for free blacks to illustrate their capabilities as citizens. Nell’s narrative of the life of Prince Whipple, the black man at the Delaware crossing, further reflects this inclination, as it relates an incident during which the black man “was once entrusted by [his owner] with a large sum of money to carry from Salem to Portsmouth. He was attacked on the road, near Newburyport, by two ruffians; one he struck with a loaded whip, the other he shot, and succeeded in arriving home in safety” (198-99). In Nell’s mind, Whipple proved his worthiness both through his physical strength—manifested both in his service during the war and in his resistance to the “ruffians”—as well as through his dependability in monetary matters. In light of the market revolution overtaking America—as a consequence of which, as Hawthorne noted, “somebody is always at the drowning point”—African Americans also asserted their claims to responsible citizenship in terms of their standing in relation to the market (38). As Wendell Phillips writes in his introduction to Nell’s 1851 pamphlet, “In a land where wealth is the basis for reputation, the colored man must prove his sagacity and enterprise by successful trade or speculation” (7). While such success required education and the self-assertion necessary to rise to the level of editor or doctor, it also required sufficient restraint to never risk one’s own self-possession—a central message of another early African American fiction, Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857).
In even more suggestive fashion, Nell notes one manner in which Revolutionary images were appropriated by the black community in a way that betokened not only black citizenship but also the possibility of black resistance. At the opening of the volume, following the prefatory materials, Nell notes a glaring “Omission,” “a matter too important to be overlooked in a book of this character” (11). The matter to which Nell refers is the organization of “a colored military company in Boston….” That company, Nell writes, will serve to “revive the efforts for erasing the word white from the military clause in the statute-book, for, until that is accomplished, their manhood and citizenship are under proscription” (12). The company had named itself the “Massasoit Guards,” in honor of “one of those Indian chiefs, who, in early colonial times, proved himself signally friendly to the interests of the Old Bay State” (11). Though “refused a loan of state arms,” the Guards “have equipped themselves in preparation for voluntary service” (11).

As the state’s refusal of support suggests, the formation of an armed militia company composed of black citizens caused serious consternation. For Nell, too, the details of the company’s formation were in a manner unsatisfactory; specifically, in terms of a name, he believed that “a better selection could have been made” (11). After all, the name of Crispus Attucks “has been already appropriated by colored military companies in New York and Cincinnati….” Nell attributes the Boston troop’s decision of a new name to the fact that the Attucks Guards was a name “already” claimed by other companies; yet his dissatisfaction with the choice seems to suggest a missed opportunity of harnessing the symbolic importance attached to Attucks. Nevertheless, the companies of free blacks played an important role in enabling those who volunteered to assert their manhood. Nell celebrates this fact in quoting from the press coverage of the companies: “The New York Tribune says of one of these
companies, in announcing their parade, “They looked like men, handled their arms like men, and, should occasion demand, we presume would fight like men.”” (153).

Though, as we have seen, parades played a central role in the claims of workers, and African Americans as well, to productive citizenship, the suggestion that groups like the Attucks Guard posed an armed threat—that they “would fight like men”—revealed another aspect of their character. As Nell makes clear, the name of Attucks was also being invoked in relation to the injustice of the Fugitive Slave Law. The renditions of Sims and Burns in Boston, Nell noted, found “both [men] marching over the very ground that ATTUCKS trod” (18). Boston abolitionists angrily invoked the name of Attucks in protest after each of these incidents. Following Sims’s rendition, in a speech at Faneuil Hall, Anson Burlingame placed Attucks in line with famous patriots of the early days of the Revolution:

The conquering of our New England prejudices in favor of liberty ‘does not pay.’ It ‘does not pay,’ I submit, to plat our fellow-citizens under practical martial law; to beat the drums in our streets; to clothe our temples of justice in chains, and to creep along, by the light of the morning star, over the ground wet with the blood of Crispus Attucks, the noble colored man, who fell in King street before the muskets of tyranny, away in the dawn of our Revolution; creep by Faneuil Hall…by the Green Dragon, where that noble mechanic, Paul Revere, once mustered the sons of liberty; within sight of Bunker Hill, where was first unfurled the glorious banner of our country; creep along, with funeral pace, bearing a brother, a man made in the image of God, not to the grave…but back to the degradation of a slavery which kills out of a living body an immortal soul. (19)

Theodore Parker, who aided in securing legal defense for Burns after his imprisonment, responded to the man’s rendition by likewise invoking Attucks: “‘And at high ‘change, over the spot where, on the 5th of March, 1770, fell the first victim in the Boston Massacre,—where the negro blood of…ATTUCKS stained the ground,—over that spot, Boston authorities carried a citizen of Massachusetts to Alexandria as a slave”’ (19).
While Nell was keen on capitalizing on Attucks’s sympathetic appeal as a “martyr” to the American cause, he was determined to show that Attucks did not take a passive role in the protest during which he was killed. “ATTUCKS,” Nell writes, “had formed the patriots in Dock Square, from whence they marched up King street, passing through the street up to the main guard, in order to make the attack. … He had been foremost in resisting, and was first slain” (16). Thus, Nell, like Burlingame, places Attucks in the pantheon of the nation’s Revolutionary heroes—as one who, like Paul Revere, was among the “foremost in resisting.” Such an argument rested both on Attucks’s exceptionality as well as his commonality: as both leader and equal member of the protesting party.

Consequently, the lesson of Attucks for free blacks was that, though relegated to a secondary position in society (as they had been during the war), African Americans should not be content to remain in the shadows.

Let it not be inferred, however, that because many colored soldiers were, from the force of circumstances, assigned a subordinate position by themselves during the war, that their more immediate descendants are to remain satisfied with a half-way excellence. But, like Crispus Attucks, leading on Boston citizens to resist tyranny, 1770,--Major Jeffrey, Latham and Freeman, each gallant and brave,--Jordan B. Noble, the drummer of Chalmette Plains,--and the many others, in more or less responsible departments, during their country's trial hour…. (378-79)

The ends to which Nell believed African Americans required leadership still entailed finding common cause with white Americans—and, therefore, like Douglass, to work through the existing channels of power: to “unite, when possible, as affinities may lead, with the various political literary, benevolent, ecclesiastical, business and social, organizations of the land….” “…[H]enceforward, in our battle for equality,” Nell concluded, “each should aim to be incorporated with the mass of Americans…and so prove valiant and consistent soldiers in Freedom's army, without arranging ourselves in a colored section” (378-9). Similarly,
groups such as the Attucks and Massasoit Guards did not envision themselves as remaining segregated; as Nell noted, the Guards “do not wish to be considered a caste company, and hence invite to their ranks any citizens of good moral character who may wish to enrol their names” (11). The black militia companies, therefore, promised not resistance but reconciliation.

Yet the final item in Nell’s collection is a narrative of an altercation in Pennsylvania between a slave owner and a company of armed blacks sheltering a fugitive slave (394-6). In September 1851, a Maryland slaveholder named Gorsuch tracked two of his slaves to Cristiana, Pennsylvania. Accompanied by Pennsylvania and Baltimore officials, as well as a son and nephew, Gorsuch found the fugitives holed up in a house, protected by a large group of blacks “armed with clubs, axes, and guns” (Philip Foner “Anti-Slavery Activity” 2:44). As the New York Tribune reported, “A parley was held, the slaveholder declaring, as it is said and believed, ‘I will go to h--l, or have my slaves.’ The door was broken in, a horn was sounded out of one of the upper windows, and, after an interval, a company of blacks, armed, gathered on the spot, and the negroes in the house made a rush down and crowded the whites out” (qtd. in Nell 395). When the whites opened fire on the house, the blacks returned fire, killing Gorsuch and wounding his son.

Nell concludes the episode, and his collection, on a note of defiance, echoing Douglass’s defense of killing the white marshal holding Anthony Burns. “Several men, white and colored, were arrested for participation in the killing of Gorsuch, the kidnapper;” Nell noted; “but, though the United States Government expended about fifty thousand dollars in the prosecution, they failed to convict any of the party” (396).
This was not the end of the story. William Parker, the free black who owned the house where the standoff took place, fled with two comrades following the altercation. Traveling along the Underground Railroad, with white authorities in pursuit, Parker and his companions arrived in Rochester, where they were sheltered by Frederick Douglass. With the aid of Julia Griffiths, the business manager of the *North Star* and an abolitionist activist, Douglass secured their passage to Canada. As Philip Foner reports, “When the fugitives boarded the boat, Parker handed Douglass the gun with which he had killed Gorsuch” (“Anti-Slavery Activity” 2:45). Two years later, Douglass wrote of the incident, “I could not look upon them as murderers…to me they were heroic defenders of the just rights of men against men-stealers and murderers” (qtd. in Philip Foner “Anti-Slavery Activity” 2:45).

This episode and countless others suggested to Nell that equality would only be achieved after further violent struggle:

> The Revolution of 1776, and the subsequent struggles in our nation's history, aided, in honorable proportion, by colored Americans, have (sad, but true, confession) yet left the necessity for a second revolution, no less sublime than that of regenerating public sentiment in favor of Universal Brotherhood. To this glorious consummation, all, of every complexion, sect, sex and condition, can add their mite, and so nourish the tree of liberty, that all may be enabled to pluck fruit from its bending branches; and, in that degree to which colored Americans may labor to hasten the day, they will prove valid their claim to the title, “Patriots of the Second Revolution.” (380)

Like many invocations of the Revolution, Nell’s volume follows a complex temporal pattern, simultaneously celebrating the past (“The Revolution of 1776”), the present (“the subsequent struggles”), and the future (“the Second Revolution”) of what is essentially one effort: to establish liberty and Universal Brotherhood. Consequently, Nell’s volume is not devoted entirely to stories of black soldiers in the American Revolution, but also contains accounts of
revolutionary activities continuing up to the time of his writing. Thus, gathered under the heading of *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* we find narratives not only of Crispus Attucks and Peter Salem but also black instigators and slave rebels including David Walker, Nat Turner, Denmark Veazie [sic], the “Virginia Maroons in the Dismal Swamp,” and Madison Washington.

Generally speaking, Nell’s intention in reciting the stories of these rebels is the same as in the rest of the volume: to illustrate their intelligence and agency. In his account of Nat Turner’s rebellion, Nell references Turner’s capability in both natural and supernatural ways: as “a prodigy reverenced among his fellows” for his facility for reading and his seeming ability to communicate with God (224), and as a figure who even the white Richmond press had to confess “‘is a shrewd, intelligent fellow…”’ (224-5). Nell celebrates Vesey, as well, for his intelligence as the author of a complex plan for slave uprising; “In the whole history of human efforts to overthrow slavery,” Nell writes, “a more complicated and tremendous plan was never formed” (253).

When applicable, Nell draws parallels between these nineteenth century revolutionaries and the Revolution of the previous century. For instance, he quotes from Turner’s “Confession,” including the rebel’s admission that “It was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th of July last” (qtd. in Nell 224). In other cases, Nell asserts the parallel himself: writing of Vesey’s rebellion in South Carolina, he claims that “Many a brave hero fell; but History, faithful to her high trust, will engrave the name of DENMARK VEAZIE on the same monument with Moses, Hampden, Tell, Bruce, Wallace, Toussaint, Lafayette, and Washington” (255). By memorializing Vesey in this fashion, Nell echoes a comparison between the heroes of the American Revolution and the unsuccessful
rebels led by Nat Turner that appears in *Clotel*. In Brown’s novel, George Green fights alongside Turner. When the rebellion fails, Green defiantly tells his captors, “‘Had we succeeded, we would have been patriots too’” (212). In short, despite most American’s aversion to black violence, all that truthfully separated one group of rebels from the other was success. As Richard Yarborough writes of this comparison, “Brown links two violent acts of liberation—one that many of his white readers would instinctively reject and one that many of them would readily endorse. Brown cannot go much farther than this lest the crucial link he is forging between the American Revolution and the one side and the Nat Turner rebellion on the other be broken” (171).

In a sense, Nell does go further than Brown in that his volume includes the story of successful slave revolt led by Madison Washington. Washington’s story, like his highly suggestive name, had for some time proven appealing to Nell’s former comrade at the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass. Madison Washington’s story would become the basis for Douglass’s first piece of fiction: the novella “The Heroic Slave”, first published in serial form in *The North Star* during March, 1853 (Andrews 318).

Madison Washington was among the captives on the slave ship *Creole*, which sailed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, in late October 1841, en route to New Orleans. On November 7th, as the ship was approached harbor in the Bahamas, the slaves revolted. Two days later, the ship, now under the command of Washington and his comrades, and piloted by the captive crew, steered into port at Nassau. British authorities immediately imprisoned the rebels; they remained confined for five months before they were freed (Wilentz *Rise* 555).
The revolt caused a sensation in America; like Joseph Cinque, the leader of the rebels aboard the *Amistad*, Madison Washington became a symbol of resistance among abolitionists. Though Washington himself could not have foreseen it, his story had a concrete impact on the United States government’s handling of the slavery debate; specifically, Madison Washington’s story aided in lifting the gag rule that had tabled antislavery petitions sent to Congress (Earle 6). On March 21, 1841, Joshua Giddings, a representative from Ohio, introduced on the floor of the House a number of antislavery resolutions. Among them was a resolution celebrating the *Creole* rebellion and declaring the slaves’ resistance justified. Giddings’ Southern opponents punished the young congressman by censuring him. Giddings then returned to Ohio to prepare for another run at the House in a special election the following month. If Giddings won reelection, all involved knew, the gag rule would (in Giddings’s words) “morally cease to operate” (Wilentz *Rise* 557). Giddings did win, and in a landslide—the final tally being 7,469 for Giddings and 393 for his Democratic opponent (556-57). According to Sean Wilentz, the immediate effects of Giddings’ victory were that, first, Giddings himself became an even more outspoken opponent of slavery, and, second, that the gag rule and threat of censure—the instruments through which slavery’s defenders sought to muzzle and intimidate their opponents, particularly Giddings and John Quincy Adams—would no longer serve to silence discussion of slavery in the House. “Killing the gag rule,” Wilentz explains, “in turn dramatically increased the likelihood of additional sectional wrangling in Congress” (557). The affair thus set the stage for future clashes over legislation including the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850.
In the years prior to composing “The Heroic Slave”, Douglass spoke of Madison Washington and developed his own strategies for making use of the rebel’s story. In March 1847, in a farewell speech to a British audience prior to his return to America, Douglass spoke with disdain of Daniel Webster, who, as Secretary of State, demanded that British officials surrender all of the slaves aboard the Creole (Philip Foner “Reference Notes” 1:440). In contrast to Webster, Douglass celebrated “the noble Madison Washington, who broke his fetters on the deck of the Creole, achieving liberty for himself and one hundred and thirty-five others, and took refuge within your dominions....” (“Farewell” 1:228). In April 1849, Douglass again celebrated Washington, deliberately describing the features that marked him as “a black man”: “wooly head, high cheek bones, protruding lip, distended nostril, and retreating forehead....” (qtd. in Yarborough 173). As with many aspects of Washington’s story, Douglass’s physical description of the man would undergo extensive revision before the publication of “The Heroic Slave”.

These early invocations of Madison Washington coincided with an increased sense of aggression in Douglass’s speeches. Speaking before the American Colonization Society in June of 1849, Douglass denounced the Mexican War, claiming, “For my part, I would not care if, to-morrow, I should hear of the death of every man who engaged in that bloody war in Mexico, and that every man had met the fate he went there to perpetrate upon unoffending Mexicans” (“American Colonization Society” 1:398). As recorded in The Liberator, this comment drew “[Applause and hisses.]” What followed proved more shocking. Douglass condemned his audience for letting “[t]he weight of your influence, numbers, political combinations and religious organizations, and the power of your arms, rest heavily upon [the slaves], and serve at this moment to keep them in their chains” (1:398). Again contrasting
the relatively obscure grievances of the American revolutionaries (“a three-penny tea tax”) with the sufferings of the slaves—and his audience’s inaction in light of that suffering—Douglass, echoing his condemnation of the Mexican War, asserted: “…I say, in view of these things, I should welcome the intelligence to-morrow, should it come, that the slaves had risen in the South, and that the sable arms which had been engaged in beautifying and adorning the South were engaged in spreading death and devastation there” (1:398-99). Such words caused a “[Marked sensation.]”; they also marked another step in the widening breach between Douglass and Garrison over the issue of violent resistance. As Philip Foner notes, “more and more [Douglass] began to justify the right of the slaves to revolt ‘on the ground that it is consistent with the conduct of the revolutionary patriots’” (“Split” 2:51).

In December, 1853, an attempt to broker peace between Garrison and Douglass arrived at Garrison’s door in the form of a letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe chided Garrison particularly for his role in spreading a rumor that Douglass was engaged in an affair with his co-worker at the North Star, Julia Griffiths (Philip Foner “Split” 2:64). Stowe had recently met with Douglass at her home; following the Garrisonians’ attacks upon Douglass, she found that “the impression was far more satisfactory, than I had anticipated” (qtd. in Philip Foner “Split” 2:63). This meeting initiated a new stage in the developing relationship between Douglass and Stowe—a relationship that in part consisted of a dialogue transpiring across texts. In considering why Douglass, with “The Heroic Slave”, undertook his first work of fiction, one must acknowledge the profound impact that Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) and its staggering success had upon Douglass.

As Jane Tompkins has written, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin was, in almost any terms one can think of, the most important book of the century. …[I]ts impact is generally thought to have
been incalculable” (124). The novel’s status as a cultural touchstone was reflected in its sales—in excess of three hundred thousand copies in America and nearly one million in Britain (Reynolds Renaissance 388). Additionally, the public’s voracious appetite for Tom-related products suggests the manner in which the readership claimed ownership of the text. As Lori Merish explains, “‘secondary’ commodities” inspired by the book—including dolls, toys, puzzles and games—served to affirm the novel’s claims to realism; moreover, they “reinforced the proprietary forms of sentimental readership, bodying forth a personalized relationship between reader and text, and apparently establishing that the novel’s characters and their stories can (indeed, perhaps should) ‘belong’ in some personal way to each individual reader” (165). In England, in particular, the sensation of Stowe’s novel spread as its subject matter was translated across visual media, manifesting itself in illustrated editions, panoramas, paintings, children’s editions, and plays including the monologue “The Christian Slave” written by Stowe for Mary E. Webb (Fisch 99-110). Many of the dramatic productions of the work staged in England and America made drastic revisions to the source text. There appear to be two polarities to these adaptations. On the one hand, some productions envisioned Legree’s receiving his comeuppance for his savage beating of Tom—though, as Judie Newman reflects, vengeance always came at the hands of whites (Newman 113). On the other hand, many productions offered depictions of black characters in increasingly dehumanized and minstrelized fashion (Fisch 101, Lott 211-233).

Beyond the circle of her famous novel, Stowe also worked to contribute to the abolitionist cause. She lent a voice of support by penning introductions to several texts by black authors, including Webb’s The Garies and Their Friends (1857), Josiah Henson’s Truth Stranger than Fiction (1858)—and William Cooper Nell’s The Colored Patriots of the
American Revolution (Levine Delany 276). In her introduction to the latter text, Stowe wrote:

[i]n considering the services of the Colored Patriots of the Revolution, we are to reflect upon them as far more magnanimous, because rendered to a nation which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals, and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake. It was not for their own land they fought, not even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit. (5)

As we shall examine in the next chapter—and as Robert Levine has suggested—Nell’s text exerted an important influence on the composition of Stowe’s next novel, Dred (1856).

Among African American activists, Stowe’s involvement in the abolitionist movement was not universally welcomed. The limitations of Stowe’s famous novel—particularly in regard to her characterization of black figures and her unwillingness to represent fully the brutality of interracial violence within the plantation system—inspired a shift in the terms with which black authors advertised their texts. As William Andrews notes, Stowe’s novel caused a representational crisis for African American authors: “From its appearance in 1851, the image of Uncle Tom took precedence in the popular mind over all previous black portraiture in American literature, including the tradition of self-portraiture built up in the slave narrative” (179). Stowe’s influence challenged the ability of African American autobiographers to assert the truthfulness of their own accounts of slavery and its brutality. As Andrews, quoting from Stowe’s Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1854), asserts, Stowe crafted her narrative under the assumption that “[t]he artist who wishes to ‘succeed’ must ‘draw a veil’ over the most ‘dreadful’ features of slavery; the book that failed to do so ‘could not be read’” (182). In the representational struggle that ensued, black authors began to transgress the limitations that white audiences had formerly enforced on black texts.
Whereas “[f]or decades the slave narrator had asked to be believed on the basis, at least in part, of his ability to restrain himself, to keep to the proprieties of discourse that required the ugliest truths of slavery to be veiled,” following the success of Uncle Tom’s Cabin “[a]n ever-heightening severity of subject or tone would now be invested with the illocutionary force of authentication itself” (183). In short, “…the black autobiographer would begin to claim credibility because he or she had violated those some proprieties of discourse” (183). Even as black autobiographers incorporated increasingly explicit detail into their narratives, they also “became less hesitant to recommend violence as a tool of resistance to tyranny”—an approach that directly countered the non-resistance of Uncle Tom (184). The continuing popularity of the sentimental mode that Stowe’s novel reflected, however, posed a complex “rhetorical problem for the militant black writers of the 1850s”: “to provide a moral rationale for the use of force as an elevated standard above and beyond the Christian fortitude of Uncle Tom” (185). As Yarborough argues, using Douglass’s reluctant tangle with Covey from the Narrative as an example, “Many Afro-American authors saw no easy way to make their black characters deserving of sympathy and at the same time to celebrate their manhood” (174).

Douglass distinguished himself among black activists for his willingness to embrace the usefulness of Stowe’s novel. In fact, Douglass openly championed the novel in promoting the Colored National Convention, which convened in Rochester in July 1853. The movement for political organization by free blacks had coalesced during the 1820s and 1830s in opposition to the workings of the American Colonization Society; thereafter free blacks staged conventions to protest the ACS and to further strengthen the infrastructure of African American political activity. As Philip Foner explains, the convention movement had
a profound impact on those whites who attended or read printed accounts of the proceedings:

“The efforts and accomplishments of the convention stimulated the frank praise of incredulous whites, and did more than any agent to refute the widespread theory of Negro inferiority” (“Negro Convention Movement” 2:37-38). By 1850, however, the convention movement had stalled. Following passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, many blacks—even those who had been born free—shunned public gatherings for fear of slave catchers. Having been stripped of any political recourse following the Act’s passage, all blacks acutely felt their freedom threatened. No conventions were convened between 1850 and 1852 (Philip Foner “Negro Convention Movement” 2:20). Yet, by 1853, Douglass sought to reinvigorate the movement; as he wrote in issuing a call for a new convention, an array of challenges and auspicious circumstances “calls trumpet-tongued for our union, co-operation, and action…”

He then proceeded to list the conditions that made such a gathering necessary:

The Fugitive Slave Act,…the proscriptive legislation of several States with a view to drive our people from their borders—the exclusion of our children from schools supported by our money—the prohibition of the exercise of the franchise—the exclusion of colored citizens from the jury box—the social barriers erected against our learning trades—the wiley and vigorous efforts of the American Colonization Society to employ the arm of the government to expel us from our native land—

Despite these obstacles, the timing for reviving the convention movement seemed right. In issuing his call, Douglass also invoked “the propitious awakening to the fact of our condition at home and abroad, which has followed the publication of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’….” (qtd. in Philip Foner “Negro Convention Movement” 2:29).

As Levine has ably illustrated, the conflicting attitudes toward the novel within the black community are well represented by the growing breach between Douglass and his former co-editor of The North Star, Martin Delany. The crux of the argument between the two was Douglass’s development as a political abolitionist—in other words, as an activist
willing to work within existing institutions (Levine Delany 72). As we have seen, African American activists placed a premium on self-sufficiency as a means of asserting a basis for citizenship. Yet the extent to which self-sufficiency meant divesting oneself of white cooperation or assistance was a more vexed issue, informing the viewpoints of those on both sides of issues such as school integration, literary and political authority, and the proper platform—to say nothing of complexion—of political and social reform groups. Similarly, Douglass’s and Delany’s responses to Uncle Tom’s Cabin reflect their conflicting political identities as a political abolitionist and proponent of emigration, respectively. In April and May, 1853, readers of The North Star—which by that time had come to be known as Frederick Douglass’s Paper—followed a series of exchanges between Douglass and Delany regarding the novel (Levine Delany 78). Delany, who eschewed white assistance in the abolitionist movement, asserted that Stowe “knows nothing about us” (qtd. in Levine Delany 78). Douglass, on the other hand, was quick to conflate emigrationist policies advocated by blacks with colonizationist schemes overseen by whites; both programs, he concluded, would entail surrendering part of the African American identity while leaving the fates of those who continued to be enslaved in the hands of whites.

Despite his public celebration of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, privately Douglass chided Stowe for her seeming advocacy of colonization; “the truth is, dear madam,” he wrote her, “we are here, and we are likely to remain” (qtd. in Weinstein 3). As Levine has argued, Douglass used his debate with Delany as an opportunity to shape the reception of Stowe’s novel—and perhaps to influence the novelist herself (Delany 72). In composing his own fiction, “The Heroic Slave”, Douglass seized an opportunity to directly respond to those shortcomings he saw in Stowe’s novel.
Douglass asserts Madison Washington’s standing as a true revolutionary from the very beginning of his narrative. He introduces his subject as a son of Virginia, as “a man who loved liberty as well as Patrick Henry,—who deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson,—and who fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great, as he who led the armies of the American colonies through the great war for freedom and independence...” (“Heroic Slave” 175). As he would a year later in defending those who resisted the rendition of Anthony Burns, Douglass invokes a range of Revolutionary figures—orators, statesmen, and military leaders—in asserting a model for Madison Washington. By measuring the black rebel by the standard of Henry, Jefferson and Washington, Douglass not only asserts Madison Washington’s commitment to the same ideals of freedom that motivated these white revolutionaries; he also embraces Madison Washington’s violence as a legitimate form of resistance. The only way in which Madison Washington falls short of his Revolutionary forebears is in the manner in which he is remembered: unlike those legendary figures, Madison Washington’s story “lives now only in the chattel records of his native State” (175). As Herman Beavers explains, Douglass’s juxtaposition of different versions of the historical record reveals that “the terms of inclusion among Virginia’s pantheon of heroes are racially inflected”; moreover, by mobilizing the example of Madison Washington, Douglass makes explicit the “need for a revisionary act of composition” to rectify such injustice (210).

Though Madison Washington ultimately enacts his liberation through violence, he first proves his worthiness of freedom through his gifts as an orator. In the narrative frame that Douglass erects around the events on board the *Creole*, Washington first attempts his escape from slavery in 1835. Before coming to a resolution to flee, Washington takes refuge
in the woods to contemplate his oppressed state and the prospects for his successful escape:

“‘I have nothing to lose. If I am caught, I shall only be a slave. If I am shot, I shall only lose a life which is a burden and a curse. If I get clear, (as something tells me I shall,) liberty, the inalienable birth-right of every man, precious and priceless, will be mine. My resolution is fixed. I shall be free’” (178).

His spoken thoughts are overheard by a white man, Mr. Listwell. Though Washington is described as an imposing physical presence, he initially influences Linstwell through his words. As Douglass writes,

   his voice, that unfailing index of the soul, though full and melodious, had that in it which could terrify as well as charm. He was just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured, or danger to be encountered,—intelligent and brave. He had the head to conceive, and the hand to execute. In a word, he was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy. (179)

Listwell’s conversion upon hearing Washington is immediate: “‘From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land’” (182).

   After Listwell leaves the stage, Douglass’s narrative picks up five years later at the white man’s hearthside. In a scene that has often been compared to the “The Senator Is But a Man” chapter in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Listwell’s reverie is interrupted by the arrival of a mysterious stranger (Foreman 193). Upon hearing the stranger’s voice, Listwell immediately recognizes him as the fugitive, Madison Washington. Like Senator and Mrs. Byrd in Stowe’s novel, Mr. Listwell, in choosing to aid the runaway, must hazard the punishment of the state’s fugitive slave law:

   By this time thoughts of what was best done about getting Madison to Canada, began to trouble Mr. Listwell; for the laws of Ohio were very
stringent against any one who should aid, or who were found aiding a slave to escape through that State. A citizen, for the simple act of taking a fugitive slave in his carriage, had just been stripped of all his property, and thrown penniless upon the world. Notwithstanding this, Mr. Listwell was determined to see Madison safely on his way to Canada. (202)

Having sheltered the fugitive in his home, Listwell puts into effect his plan to escort Madison to Canada. Shortly thereafter, he receives a letter postmarked from Windsor. “‘I nestle in the mane of the British lion,’” Madison writes, “‘protected by his mighty paw from the talons and the beak of the American eagle. I AM FREE, and breathe an atmosphere too pure for slaves, slave-hunters, or slave-holders’” (205). By finding refuge in a British territory, Madison Washington not only reflects the status of the thousands of slaves who fled to Canada in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law; his attempt at freedom also ironically reflects those of the runaways who entrusted their fates to the British during the Revolution.

Douglass turns Americans’ claims to freedom on their heads; in contrast to the “atmosphere” of freedom in Canada, Madison describes his experience as a fugitive within America’s borders in dehumanizing terms: “‘…during my flight, I felt myself robbed by society of all my just rights; that I was in an enemy’s land, who sought both my life and my liberty. They had transformed me into a brute; made merchandise of my body, and, for all the purposes of my flight, turned day into night…’” (195).

The third act of Madison’s story unfolds one year later, back in his native Virginia. Listwell, brought to Virginia on business, once again encounters Madison, who, having returned in a failed effort to liberate his wife, is now imprisoned in a slave coffle. In his description of the degraded state of the slave gang—and his denunciation of those who benefit from their exploitation—Douglass’s enraged rhetoric eclipses that of Stowe’s more mannered novel.
Here were one hundred and thirty human beings,—children of a common Creator—guilty of no crime—men and women, with hearts, minds, and deathless spirits, chained and fettered, and bound for the market in a christian country,—in a country boasting of its liberty, independence, and high civilization! Humanity converted into merchandise, and linked in iron bands, with no regard to decency or humanity! (215)

In targeting the vice of Southern slave society, Douglass again refuses to pull any punches, highlighting the physical and emotional suffering of men and women shackled and separated from their families—“And all to fill the pockets of men too lazy to work for an honest living, and who gain their fortune by plundering the helpless, and trafficking in the souls and sinews of men” (216). Faced with the iniquity of the slave system—and the hypocrisy of America’s purported freedom—Mr Listwell “stood wondering that the earth did not open and swallow up such wickedness” (216). Though Listwell is unable to secure Madison’s freedom before the coffle embarks for the South, he does manage to slip three metal files into the pocket of Madison’s pants (223).

The fourth act of the narrative treats Madison’s experience retrospectively. Just as the prior sections of the novella were narrated from the perspective of Listwell, Douglass selects a white witness who can give voice to Madison’s story. The action of this fourth section entails an argument between two shiphands, one of whom, Tom Grant, has returned to Richmond following the fateful voyage of the Creole. As Grant suffers the antagonism of his fellow sailor (who attributes the successful slave rebellion to “‘ignorance of the real character of darkies in general’”), he becomes increasingly enraged. Turning upon his adversary, Grant declares that “‘I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward…’” (228). As a means of illustrating his point, and of correcting the other sailor’s misperceptions, Grant narrates the story of Madison Washington, the leader of the revolt on board the ship. “‘The leader of the mutiny in question was just as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was
as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand. The name of this man, strange to say, (ominous of greatness,) was MADISON WASHINGTON’’’ (232). Continuing to narrate the story, Grant explains how, while preparing the ship for an approaching storm, he was startled by a pistol shot; turning around, he found the deck seemingly ‘‘covered with fiends from the pit’’ (233). Having been knocked unconscious by one of the rebels, Grant awakes to find himself, and the ship, in the control of Madison Washington.

Though Grant has been physically subdued by Madison, he, like Listwell, ultimately comes under the influence of the black man’s reason and rhetoric. The rebel leader, charged by his prisoner with murder, turns to Grant and responds: ‘‘You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night’s work. …We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man’s heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they’’’ (234-35). With a sharpness unmatched even by George Green in Brown’s Clotel, Douglass makes the case that those who honor the heroes of the American Revolution must likewise honor slave rebels like Madison Washington. As Madison’s speech quoted above makes clear, he does not disavow violence as such; rather, he asserts a proper motivation for that violence: “freedom” is his goal. Having a “true man’s heart” means recognizing that violence is an acceptable means of pursuing freedom; failing to accept that postulate would necessitate labeling both the black rebels and America’s revolutionary fathers as murderers. Thus, Douglass asserts a natural right to resistance shared across racial lines.
Grant, like Listwell, undergoes a conversion experience upon his encounter with Madison Washington: “‘I confess,’” he tells his audience, “‘I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in an honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action’” (237-38). In Grant’s case, however, the extent of the conversion experience is limited; he cannot fully accept Madison’s claiming of the Revolutionary mantle. In attempting to voice his objections, Grant explains that “‘It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to the one whom I deemed my inferior’” (238). As Herman Beavers explains, “Tom Grant serves the function…of articulating the blind spot Douglass found among his Northern counterparts” (224). Moreover, by giving voice to Grant’s prejudice, Douglass makes explicit the racial double-standard that likewise informs the perspective of Captain Amasa Delano in Melville’s “Benito Cereno”.

The critical consensus regarding Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” seems to be that, though an important document, the novella is a lesser literary accomplishment than the author’s autobiographical writings. Some, including Yarborough, contend that the flaw lies in Douglass’s decision to fictionalize the narrative and that “the freer rein the form offered Douglass in his depiction of the exemplary black male hero paradoxically also confronted him more directly than possibly ever before with the restrictions imposed by the expectations of the whites to whom he was appealing” (181). These restrictions manifest themselves in Douglass’s reliance on a white point of view and his reluctance to represent black racial violence. Douglass has most frequently been criticized for the prominent role given to
Listwell in interpreting Madison’s narrative and in aiding his attempts at escape. Gabrielle Foreman attributes Douglass’s decision to create such a sympathetic white character to an increasing awareness that “white men are the only reader-citizens imbued with standing as witnesses; they are his only politically embodied readers, the only ones, that is, with a ‘vote’” (192). “Douglass makes a representational choice,” Foreman continues, “to recognize that only the white male gaze and ear have the actual power to confirm his slave protagonist Madison Washington’s subjectivity” (192). To be sure, Douglass envisioned his audience as composed in part—or, following the novella’s republication in the collection Autographs for Freedom (1853), in the main—by whites. This recognition explains the Douglass’s emphasis on Listwell’s contributions to Madison’s escape; rather than staying on the sidelines of the debate, Listwell becomes a committed abolitionist, and offers support through whatever means are available. For his service he earns a sense of moral satisfaction: “He had done something ‘to deliver the spoiled out of the hands of the spoiler,’ he had given bread to the hungry, and clothes to the naked; he had befriended a man to whom the laws of his country forbade all friendship,—and in proportion to the odds against his righteous deed, was the delightful satisfaction that gladdened his heart” (204). By envisioning a successful attempt at black liberation as a multiracial endeavor, Douglass offers an additional rebuttal of Delany’s emigrationist philosophy. Moreover, Listwell’s engagement on Madison’s behalf does not counteract the black man’s agency. Though Listwell’s success in slipping Madison the files provides an auspicious opportunity, Madison nonetheless asserts the actions of the slaves themselves as essential to winning their freedom: “‘My men have won their liberty, with no other weapons but their own BROKEN FETTERS’” (235). Even as Listwell aids in loosing
those fetters, Madison’s leadership in recruiting first Listwell and then his fellow captives to the cause of freedom ultimately makes their escape possible.

Many critics see another compromise of Madison’s agency in Douglass’s decision to downplay the violence of the *Creole* revolt. Due to the narrative frame of the text, the slaves seize the ship during the interlude during which the narrator, Grant, lies unconscious on the deck. Rather than witness the physical violence by which Madison wrests control of the ship, we, through Grant’s eyes, witness the oratory through which Madison asserts his right to that control. Yarborough postulates: “One might argue that this approach reinforces the statesmanlike quality that Douglass may have been striving to imbue in his portrayal of Washington—after all, how often do depictions (literary and otherwise) of George Washington fully convey the violent nature of his heroism?” (181). While Yarborough’s reading rings true in part, it is important to note that nineteenth century Revolutionary fictions did figure the Revolution in violent terms, and envisioned even the leading figures of the struggle as partaking of that violence. Whereas Yarborough contends that “Douglass’s caution here strips his fictional slave rebel of much of his radical, subversive force,” it is important to consider the subversive manner in which Madison demands equality with the heroes of the American Revolution (181).

Ultimately, Yarborough concludes, “The Heroic Slave” “leaves us wondering whether the tools of the master can ever be used to achieve the complete liberation of the slave” (183). Channeling Bercovitch, Yarborough asserts that Douglass’s work is undone by the fact that “the very figures whose patriotic heritage Douglass claims for his hero won their fame by working to establish a social order in which the enslavement of blacks like Washington was a crucial component” (180). Andrews makes much the same point in
asserting that Douglass’s narrative reinscribes the norm hat he advocates violating; “The Heroic Slave” justifies rebellion “by an appeal to the authorizing mythology of an oppressive culture” (187). Yet these invocations of the American founding mythology do not equal a ratification of the status quo; reading Douglass’s fiction—or any Revolutionary fiction—in such absolutist terms denies what Levine describes as “the pragmatic interplay between the conventional and the subversive in the discourse of black elevation…” (23).

Given the complex manner in which black activists sought to mobilize the image of the black Revolutionary soldier, Douglass’s text should be considered more subversive than his critics let on. Assuming Beavers’s contention that we must read Grant’s narration of the rebellion critically, it is possible to locate in the novella’s conclusion yet another assertion of black militancy that resonates with black Americans’ appropriations of the Revolution. When the Creole reaches harbor in Nassau, Douglass revises the historical record by identifying black troops, rather than British officials, as the authority that intervenes on the slaves’ behalf. Grant, given his prejudice, can only view these soldiers as “‘stupid blockheads’” (238); when told by Grant that “‘the slaves on board were as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold,’” these soldiers (from Grant’s perspective) “‘showed their ivory, rolled up their white eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity’” (238). Grant’s denial of the black soldiers’ authority—and their humanity—does not carry any authoritative or narrative power over them. Rather, Grant, like Delano, fails to recognize the revolutionary possibilities represented by the black troop. Douglass stops short of envisioning the apocalyptic violence that marks Melville’s text; as in his July 4th oration, he concludes his text hopefully yet (as he still speaks through Grant’s point of view) ironically: the soldiers and former slaves
“poured through the gangway,—formed themselves into a procession on the wharf,—bid farewell to all on board, and, uttering the wildest shouts of exaltation, they marched, amidst the deafening cheers of a multitude of sympathizing spectators, under the triumphant leadership of their heroic chief and deliverer, MADISON WASHINGTON.”

In an echo of the proud patriotism—and the potential for revolutionary violence—of the Attucks Guards, Douglass’s novella succeeds in reasserting a space for black agency within American identity.
The term “Slave Power” was coined by Thomas Morris in the 1830s, and used by Lincoln and Republicans during the 1850s (Earle 8).

For more on the function of the jeremiad as a “rite of assent,” see Berkovitch, 3-30. On the Fourth of July oration as a similar rite, see Bercovitch, 141-52.

Of the last of these factors, Moss illustrates her point by referencing a speech by Charles Sumner (in which the senator advised Americans to “tar and feather” officials who enforced the Fugitive Slave Law) and a decree by Boston free blacks stating, “The example of the Revolutionary Fathers in resisting British oppression, and throwing the tea overboard in Boston Harbor, rather than submit to a three-penny tax, is a most significant one to us, when MAN is likely to be deprived of his God-given liberty” (qtd. in Moss 237).

The 1821 New York constitutional convention failed to provide any additional rights to blacks (Wilentz Rise 593).

Leutze, himself an abolitionist, wanted the painting to inspire the European revolutionaries (Fischer 2-3). The painting was shown over four months at Stuyvesant Institute in New York in 1851, receiving over fifty thousand visitors (Howat 293). In its first catalogue, Leutze’s painting was described as “a picture by the sight of which, in this weary and exhausted time, one can recover health and strength” and which “has power to work upon the hearts, and inflame the spirits of all that behold it” (qtd. in Howat 299).

In Clotel, Brown asks: “Who fought more bravely for American independence than the blacks? A negro, by the name of Attucks, was the first that fell in Boston at the commencement of the revolutionary war; and throughout the whole of the struggles for liberty in this country, the negroes have contributed their share” (160-61). Continuing in a more aggressive tone, Brown queries, “And what did these noble men receive in return for their courage, their heroism? Chains and slavery. Their good deeds have been consecrated only in their own memories” (161).

Nell calls upon a number of texts describing the Massacre to rebut a smear campaign by the Boston Transcript, which in 1851 condemned Attucks as an incendiary (16-17).

Douglass denounced the Mexican War as a “murderous war—a war against the free states—as a war against freedom, against the Negro, and against the interests of the workingmen of this country” (1:398).

In an August 4, 1857 speech on “West India Emancipation,” Douglass again invoked Madison Washington as model of resistance alongside other black revolutionaries, asserting: “Madison Washington who struck down his oppressor on the deck of the Creole, is more worthy to be remembered than the colored man who shot Pitcairn at Bunker Hill” (2:438). Yarborough reads this remark as a “quite remarkable repudiation of the popular appeal to an American patriotic past as a way to validate black slave violence” and as an outcome of “the exhaustion of Douglass’s patience with the limited efficacy of moral suasion as an antislavery tactic” (181).

Andrews, continuing his analysis of The Key, poses the effects of Stowe’s novel—and her subsequent discussions of the truthfulness of that work of fiction—as pernicious: “…in The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin she encouraged the reading of black autobiography as a gloss on her own novel, the more to convince people that her novel could be treated ‘as a reality.’ In the process she treated the slave narrative in the familiar, circumscribed manner of her era—as a source of facts best employed as signifiers of some prior reality (slavery) or some higher reality (myths of slavery valorized by white writing)” (182). Stowe’s appropriations of African American texts and themes are indeed problematic; yet Andrews oversimplifies the work of Stowe’s novel when he claims that “Stowe’s myth reconciled black progress with black alienation without threatening the white status quo” (180).
CHAPTER SIX

“WE ARE THE ONES ALL SIDES ARE WILLING TO GIVE UP”:
FALSE REPUBLICANS AND BLACK REVOLUTIONARIES IN
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S DRED

In 1853, J.P. Jewett Publishers of Boston brought out a volume entitled Autographs for Freedom. Practically speaking, the volume, published under the auspices of “The Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society,” was an attempt to raise funds for the society’s various activist projects. Foremost among these was aiding the flagging fortunes of Frederick Douglass’s Paper, which, since its inception as the North Star in 1847, had faced mounting financial difficulties. Additionally, the society pledged its support to a freedman’s school in Kansas, circulated anti-slavery literature in Kentucky, and lent support to fugitive slaves passing through Rochester on the Underground Railroad. Douglass himself contributed to the volume by republishing his novella, “The Heroic Slave,” which had been serialized in his paper during March. Other contributors included such notable activists and authors as Lewis Tappan, Charles Grandison Finney, Senator Charles Sumner, Caroline Kirkland, John Greenleaf Whittier, Catherine Beecher, “Miss Sedgwick,” and “Mrs. H.B. Stowe.” Accompanying each story, poem, or testimonial was a facsimile of the author’s signature. Copies were offered to the paper’s subscribers and sold at abolitionist fairs (Philip Foner “Editor” 1:89).
Though conceived as a fundraiser for the newspaper and as “a GIFT BOOK” for readers, the volume retained a moral purpose: as Julia Griffiths, Douglass’s associate and the editor of the collection, expressed hopefully in her preface, the book “may help to swell the tide of that sentiment that, by the Divine blessing, will sweep away from this otherwise happy land, the great sin of SLAVERY” (v). Like the call for a National Negro Convention issued by Douglass that spring, Griffiths’s introduction suggests a burgeoning sense of timely purpose and optimism within the abolitionist movement. As Douglass would make explicit in his call, a major source of that optimism was the phenomenal success of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). Stowe’s prominent place in Autographs for Freedom—she penned both a short story and a poem for the book, and was the designated recipient of a third entry, a “Letter from the Earle of Carlisle to Mrs. H.B. Stowe”—suggests that she was not only a major draw for the collection, but also that she had become a force to reckon with in the movement as a whole.

In her short piece from Autographs for Freedom, “The Slave and Slave-Owner,” Catharine Sedgwick echoes Griffiths’s hopeful view of slavery’s inevitable demise. Chief among the signs of the slave’s changing fortune, in Sedgwick’s view, is the awakening of the literary establishment—and, by implication, its audience—to sympathy with the slave. Alluding to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Sedgwick proclaims: “The most effective romance of our times has been written for slaves”; moreover, “The genius of more than one of our best poets has been consecrated to them” (24). Issuing from these successes, the sufferings of the slave “divide the hearts and councils of our great nation. They are daily remembered in the prayers of the faithful. They are the most earnest topic of the Christian world” (24). “But the slave-owner!” Sedgwick cries; “who weeps, who prays, who lives, who dies for him!”(24).
Whereas the slave, with patient resignation, can foresee his eventual liberation, the future holds no consolation for the slaveholder: “The slave looks forward with ever-growing hope to the struggle that must come. He joyfully ‘smells the battle afar off.’ The slave-owner folds his arms, and shuts his eyes in paralyzing despair. He hears the fearful threatenings of the gathering storm. He knows it must come,—to him fatally. It is only a question of time!” (26-27).

Sedgwick’s rhetoric in this passage is often frustrating; she can only view the institution of slavery from the outside and with the luxury of time on her side. Ironies abound in her claims that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was written “for” slaves, or that the slave’s state is preferable because “The slave-owner inflicts wrongs,—the slave but suffers it” (24). Such sentiments elide both the rights—including literacy—denied slaves, as well their very real suffering. When Sedgwick writes, “The great eras of domestic life, bright to the thoughtless slave, are dark with forecasting shadows to the slave-owner” (25), she reveals her propensity for the “romantic racialism” that Melville would satirize in “Benito Cereno” and for which Stowe was criticized by members of the abolitionist community. Finally, the terms in which Sedgwick describes the manifestations of white sympathy for the slave ascend into implausibility: though they may “weep” and “pray” for the enslaved, in 1853 no white Americans appeared willing to “die” for the slave’s freedom.

Stowe’s short story from *Autographs*, the diptych “The Altar of Freedom; or, Two Pictures in One,” interrogates the rationale behind whites’ reluctance to sacrifice on behalf of the slave. The two sections of the story—set, respectively, in 1776 and 1850—establish a stark contrast between the republican spirit of the Revolution and the decline of liberty that culminated in the Fugitive Slave Law.² The first part of the diptych, “The Altar of Liberty,
or 1776,” begins in much the same fashion as Sedgwick’s *The Linwoods* (1835)—with children playing at the parts of patriots in the Americans’ fight for independence. Here, a brother and sister are sent out on a winter afternoon to collect fuel from the woodpile. The young boy, Dick, transforms his handkerchief into a makeshift “‘flag of Liberty,’” which he plants atop the woodpile; he then instructs his sister to surrender her bonnet, “‘and just holler now, Grace, “Hurra for Liberty;” and we’ll throw up your bonnet and my cap; and we’ll play, you know, that we were the whole army, and I’m General Washington’” (129-29). Bonnet and cap fly off on the breeze; Dick justifies the sacrifice, saying, “‘I heard it in one of father’s letters to mother, that we ought to offer up everything on the altar of Liberty! And so I made an altar of the wood-pile’” (131).

Though already a fervent patriot, young Dick’s imagination has clearly twisted the meaning of his father’s message. Once safely back inside, Dick receives a primer on the nature of the revolutionary cause; after the boy’s aunt complains of the poor quality of her tea, the boy confesses, “‘I never exactly understood what it was about the tea, and why the Boston folks threw it all overboard’” (133). His mother kindly responds that the Bostonians’ resistance came about “‘Because there was an unlawful tax upon it, that the government had no right to lay. It wasn’t much in itself,’” she confesses, “‘but it was a part of a whole system of oppressive meaness, designed to take away our rights, and make us slaves, of a foreign power!’” (133). By resisting enslavement, she argues, the citizens of the country have established for themselves a great destiny:

“‘This is a great country, and it will be greater and greater: and it’s very important that it should have free and equal laws, because it will by and by be so great. This country, if it is a free one, will be a light of the world,—a city set on a hill, that cannot be hid; and all the oppressed and distressed from other countries shall come here to enjoy equal rights and freedom.
This, dear boy, is why your father and uncles have gone to fight, and why they do stay and fight, though God knows what they suffer…” (133-34)

The children’s father, we learn, is currently barracked with the Continental forces at Valley Forge, and has sent his family a letter announcing that a collection will be taken up in their neighborhood for sustaining the troops through the harsh winter. Though of modest means, the family promptly offers up their surplus when soldiers arrive for the collection; the children, in turn, surrender their stockings for the aid of the soldiers (135-39). In this scene, Stowe revisits the republican arguments of the Revolutionary period. Establishing a democracy, the revolutionaries believed, would place “particularly heavy demands on the virtue of the people” (Bailyn 65).³ To achieve the nation’s destiny—to become a land of “free and equal laws” for all, including “the oppressed and distressed”—would require great sacrifice. As someone who understands the higher purpose of the Revolution, the mother feels particularly called upon to make such sacrifices; when asked by Dick what she has offered upon the “altar of Liberty,” she responds, “‘All that I have, dears…—my husband and my children!’” (139).

The second half of the diptych, “The Altar of—, 1850,” begins with another domestic scene, with the significant difference that this second family is comprised of (apparently) free blacks. Like George and Eliza Harris’s apartment in Montreal at the conclusion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, this household is a model of propriety and domestic arrangement: the mother has made an enterprise of taking in washing, the son has improved himself by his schooling sufficient to make out the bills for his mother’s business, and the father has earned a smart return upon his labor (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 604). Whereas George and Eliza’s apartment becomes the site of a family reunion, however, the latter apartment becomes the site of a tragic separation. As the family is sitting down to dinner, two men burst through door and
arrest the father “in the name of the United States!” (“Altar” 144-45). “Are you not the
property of Mr. B., of Georgia?” an officer demands. “Gentlemen, I have been a free, hard-
working man, these ten years,” the father replies, to no avail (145). “Shall we describe the
leave-taking?” Stowe poses; “—the sorrowing wife, the dismayed children, the tears, the
anguish,—that simple, honest, kindly home, in a moment so desolated!” (145).

The scene then shifts to a court room where “the man stood there to be tried—for
life?—no; but for the life of life—for liberty!” (145). Meanwhile, “Lawyers hurried to and
fro, buzzing, consulting, bringing authorities,—all anxious, zealous, engaged,—for what?—
to save a fellow-man from bondage?—no; anxious and zealous lest he might escape—full of
zeal to deliver him over to slavery” (145). Amidst the chaos of this nightmarish scene, the
prisoner “dimly learns that he is to be sacrificed—on the altar of the Union” (145).

Returning helpless fugitives to slavery, Stowe cynically suggests, has become a national
pastime: “Senator and statesman, the learned and patriotic, are out, this day, to give their
countenance to an edifying and impressive, and truly American spectacle,—the sale of a
man!” (145-46). A sense of excitement permeates the scene, “for it is important and
interesting to see a man put down that has tried to be a free man” (147).

In Stowe’s juxtaposition between the altars of Liberty and Union, we see the
perversions of republicanism that have occurred as a result of slavery and the Fugitive Slave
Law. Whereas the revolutionaries—both those men who take up arms and the women and
children who remain on the home front—celebrate self-sacrifice as a demonstration of their
individual and collective virtue, those who comply with the Fugitive Slave Law celebrate
their feigned virtue in sacrificing the liberty of the “oppressed and distressed.” Moreover,
under the Fugitive Slave Law, America’s republican institutions have been corrupted. Rather
than an independent check upon the encroachment of tyranny, the legal system functions as an instrument of control for the powerful over the powerless. Politicians, entrusted with power to enact the business of the people, have succumbed to the temptation to exert that power against the people. Rather than sustaining the people in freedom, the political system debases them to a state of slavery. “Union” has become an idol to which the rights of any American can be sacrificed. Stowe explicitly makes this point when, following her sentimental reference to the family’s separation, she switches to a solemn and threatening direct address of the reader: “Ah, ye who defend this because it is law, think, for one hour, what if this that happens to your poor brother should happen to you!” (145). “Such was the altar in 1776,” Stowe concludes; “—such is the altar in 1850!” (147).

In her second antislavery novel, *Dred; a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), Stowe asserts that the “compromises” undertaken for the preservation of the union have been almost entirely to the detriment of the anti-slavery party and the benefit of the pro-slavery camp. Composed in the wake of brazen acts of aggression by slavery’s defenders in Kansas and on the floor of the Senate, the novel captures the rising anger of abolitionists at the government’s accommodation to the Slave Power, and presents a damning case against the South on grounds that it has betrayed the nation’s founding republican principles. Stowe’s prosecution of the South gathers steam as Tom Gordon and his mob of supporters seek after power and silence all opposition to the slave system. Their reactionary posture becomes explicit during an exchange between Edward Clayton and Frank Russell:

“How, I’ll tell you one thing, Clayton, that I’ve heard. You made some remarks at a public meeting, up at E., that have started a mad-dog cry, which I suppose came from Tom Gordon. See here; have you noticed this article in the *Trumpet of Liberty*?” said he, looking over a confused stack of papers on his table. “Where’s the article? O, here it is.”

218
At the same time he handed Clayton a sheet bearing the motto “Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable,” and pointed to an article headed

“COVERT ABOLITIONISM! CITIZENS, BEWARE!” (467)

Stowe’s pointed reference to the newspaper’s motto, which is derived from one of Daniel Webster’s famous pleas for national unity, serves to implicate those who have fostered a spirit of “compromise” in threatening the rights of Americans. Rather than solidify the links between Liberty and union, such measures as the Fugitive Slave Law had instead diminished the liberty of not only the fugitives themselves but also those now compelled by law to cooperate in the slave’s degradation. Opposition to the tyrannical Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 had compelled many northerners, including Stowe, to take up the anti-slavery standard. Though Webster himself had passed away in October 1852, the spirit of accommodation to the South that Webster embodied in the minds of many abolitionists continued to inform the government’s policies (Wilentz Rise 666). During the debates over slavery’s extension into Kansas and Nebraska, many more, including Abraham Lincoln, expressed opposition to either the institution itself, or to the prospect of extending its footprint in the west.

Lincoln’s opposition to the proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 is instructive to the reader of Dred, as Lincoln’s speeches and Stowe’s novel trade in similar critiques of the South’s legalistic defense of slavery; moreover, these critiques are built upon shared views regarding economics, the republican basis of government, and the nature of the American Revolution. In a speech delivered in Peoria in October 1854, Lincoln denounced Stephen Douglas—his future opponent for the Senate—for supporting the bill, which would repeal the Missouri Compromise and make the future of slavery in the territories a matter of “popular sovereignty” (Wilentz 671-72). Lincoln was not willing, in 1854, to contest the
legal basis for slavery in those places where it was already established and codified, as in the
southern states, nor was he willing to scrap the notion of sectional compromise. Yet he
builds a case against the Nebraska legislation, first by debunking the South’s claims that
extending slavery into the territories is necessary for their continued “self-government.” “…I
do not doubt not,” Lincoln declared, “that the people of Nebraska are, and will continue to be, as
good as the average of people elsewhere. I do not say the contrary. What I do say is, that no
man is good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent. I say this is the
leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism” (61). The master-slave
relationship is a refutation of republicanism, Lincoln asserts, not only because the governor
lacks the consent of the governed, but also because “he governs him by a set of rules
altogether different from those which he prescribes for himself. Allow all the governed an
equal voice in the government, and that, and that only, is self-government” (61).

In the midst of the Nebraska controversy, Lincoln espied a larger and more gradual
attempt on the part of slavery’s defenders to shift the basis for government away from such
honored principles as consent and equality.

Little by little, but steadily as man’s march to the grave, we have been
giving up the old for the new faith. Near eighty years ago we began by
declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we
have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others
is a “sacred right of self-government.” These principles cannot stand
together. They are as opposite as God and mammon; and whoever holds to
the one must despise the other. When Pettit, in connection with his support
of the Nebraska bill, called the Declaration of Independence a “self-evident
lie” he only did what consistency and candor require all other Nebraska
men to do. (63-64)

To accede to the Nebraska legislation, then, and to countenance the master-slave relationship
as one that deserves recognition and protection under new laws, Lincoln argues, is equivalent
to disavowing the ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. A “compromise” of
that nature would be no compromise at all; it would be an abdication of principle for the sole benefit of one of the two parties. Thus, Lincoln predicted dire consequences should the Kansas-Nebraska act pass:

Slavery may or may not be established in Nebraska. But whether it be or not, we shall have repudiated—discarded from the councils of the Nation—the *Spirit* of *Compromise*; for who after this will ever trust in a national compromise? The spirit of mutual concession—that spirit which first gave us the Constitution, and which has thrice saved the Union—we shall have strangled and cast from us forever. And what shall we have in lieu of it? The South flushed with triumph and tempted to excesses; the North, betrayed, as they believe, brooding on wrong and burning for revenge. (61-62).

By standing upon republican principle, Lincoln hoped to position himself as a moderate even as he forcefully campaigned against Douglas and his bill. He advocated “restoring” the Missouri Compromise, by which limitations had been placed on the territory open to slavery (Wilentz *Rise* 231-240). Indeed, Lincoln’s zeal in attacking the supporters of the Nebraska bill fell far short of the vehemence with which abolitionists, including Garrison, decried not only the compromises of 1820, 1850, and 1854, but also the Constitution itself as untenable accommodations to the Slave Power. The Constitution could be read as a repudiation of the Declaration’s emphasis on equality, for, in addition to countenancing the existence of slavery, the document insured that the slaveholding minority would have an unequal voice in the government. As Sean Wilentz reports, the “artificial subsidy of federal power” that accompanied the three-fifths provision seriously inflated the South’s influence in national politics: the additional votes gleaned from (but unaccountable to) the slave population increased the South’s representation in Congress, added strength to its voice in the parties’ nominating conventions, and swelled its electoral tally in presidential elections (*Rise* 639). These arrangements, Wilentz concludes, “had helped ensure that eight of the first twelve presidents of the United States…were slaveholders” (639-40). These ancillary benefits of the
slave system made Southerners even more protective of their “right” to the institution. As Frank Russell admits, “The three fifths vote that they get by it is a thing they won’t part with. They’ll die first” (Dred 465).

Lincoln would not countenance aggression from the South nor vengefulness from the North; he makes as much clear when he notes disdainfully that, “Already a few in the North defy all constitutional restraints, resist the execution of the fugitive slave law, and even menace the institution of slavery in the states where it exists” (62). Yet, in continuing to weigh the implications of the proposed legislation against the model of history, Lincoln suggests that the pro-slavery side is unquestionably in the wrong. In disavowing the Declaration’s assertion that “all men are created equal,” Pettit, Calhoun and the pro-slavery faction have run afoul of the spirit of the nation’s Revolutionary history:

If this had been said among Marion’s men, southerners though they were, what would have become of the man who said it? If this had been said to the men who captured Andre, the man who said it probably would have been hung sooner than Andre was. If it had been said in old Independence Hall, seventy-eight years ago, the very door-keeper would have throttled the man, and thrust him into the street.

Let no one be deceived. The spirit of seventy-six and the spirit of Nebraska are utter antagonisms; and the former is being rapidly displaced by the latter. (64).

The examples of Marion and his fellow revolutionaries still resonated in the mid-nineteenth century, and, as Lincoln suggests, their example demanded vigilance and virtue on the part of those who would stem the breech between the nation’s republican ideals and its undemocratic practice. “Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust,” Lincoln concludes. “Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit if not the blood of the Revolution” (64). Though Lincoln campaigned for peace, implicit in his argument is a recognition that the struggle over principle could eventually, and justifiably, lead to blows. The logical
conclusion to be drawn from Lincoln’s remarks is that the party opposed to slavery has the right and the responsibility to resist tyranny—the basis for America’s break with England.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe had famously expressed her belief that sentiment, in combination with Christian passivity, was the tool that could best galvanize public opinion and effect change. “But what can any individual do?” she asked rhetorically, in reference to the specter of slavery.

Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that they feel right. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with Christ? or are they swayed and perverted by the sophistries of worldly policy? (624)

Given that Stowe’s emphasis on sympathy and the governing dictates of the moral sense so deeply inform her first novel, her readers must necessarily have received a jolt upon reading, in her second, the following notions expressed by Frank Russell:

> “Why, Clayton, moral sentiment, as you call it, is a humbug! The whole world acquiesces in what goes—they always have. There is a great outcry about slavery now; but let it succeed, and there won’t be. When they can out-vote the Northern States, they’ll put them down. They have kept them subservient by intrigue so far, and by and by they’ll have the strength to put them down by force. England makes a fuss now; but let them only succeed, and she’ll be civil as a sheep. Of course, men always make a fuss about injustice, when they have nothing to gain by holding their tongues; but England’s mouth will be stopped with cotton—you’ll see it. They love trade, and hate war. And so the fuss of anti-slavery will die out in the world.” (466)

In advising against adopting the Nebraska bill, Lincoln argued that among the most damaging consequences of accommodating the South was that such a policy gives off the appearance that “there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*” (58). For Lincoln, a believer in the republican ethos, the self-serving actions of the South have estranged the nation from its true, republican identity. For Russell, the opposite is true: self-interest is not
only America’s but man’s governing principle, and republicanism has simply served as a cloak by which he has disguised his self-interest. The newspaper’s attack on Clayton’s right to free speech serves as just once example of how the supporters of slavery have distorted republicanism into a defense of tyranny. The article from the Trumpet of Liberty borrows its terms—particularly its emphasis on wakefulness and watching—from the republican pamphlets of the Revolutionary period: “‘It is time for the friends of our institutions to be awake. …This young man is supposed to be infected with the virus of Northern abolitionists. We cannot too narrowly watch the course of such individuals; for the only price at which we can maintain liberty is eternal vigilance’” (467-8). The irony of this argument, of course, is that, in practice, the South’s institutions—its constitutions, judicial systems, and class arrangement—are fundamentally un-republican, serving the interests of only a select portion of the population. The elitist construction of Southern society manifests itself in the newspaper’s distrust of both slaves and poor whites as threats to elite authority—“‘Such remarks, dropped in the ear of a restless and ignorant population, will be a fruitful source of sedition and insurrection.’” Moreover, the paper’s condemnation reveals its intolerance of dissent among the elite leadership—“‘Mr. Clayton belongs to one of our oldest and most respected families, which makes his conduct the more inexcusable’” (467-8).

The Southern elite’s success in appropriating republican rhetoric in defense of their own interests, rather than those of the people writ large, informs Russell’s—and Stowe’s—pessimism regarding the prospects for reform. “‘I tell you, as a solemn fact, that we can’t do it,’” Russell says of the possibility of unseating power in the South. “‘Those among us who have got the power in their hands are determined to keep it, and they are wide awake. They don’t mean to let the first step be taken, because they don’t mean to lay down their power’”
Again, Russell’s language evokes the importance of wakefulness or vigilance for the preservation of liberty, though, as he points out, the slaveholders are fundamentally interested in exercising power rather than checking its ability to impinge upon liberty.

Russell’s comments suggest a political reality to which those opposed to slavery had been late to awaken: that “the Southern way of life was…threatening republican institutions and mores…” (Miller 75). In this context, the conflagration surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act is not a small matter of regional significance; rather, it is a pivotal conflict that will shape the identity of the nation. As Stowe writes in her preface to *Dred*.

> Never has there been a crisis in the history of this nation so momentous as the present. …God in his providence is now asking the American people, Is the system of slavery, as set forth in the American code, right? Is it so desirable, that you will directly establish it over broad regions, where till now, you have solemnly forbidden it to enter? And this question the American people are about to answer. (3-4)

Stowe retained her idealism in the face of the coming challenge; “If ever a nation was raised up by Divine Providence, and led forth upon a conspicuous stage, as if for the express purpose of solving a great moral problem in the sight of all mankind, it is this nation,” she writes. And yet Stowe’s second antislavery novel is chastened by a sense of sober realism. As Lisa Whitney asserts, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, though “[a]n unqualified success by popular literary standards,” when “[t]aken on its own terms…appeared to have failed in its mission: Americans had neither turned to the gospel of Christ in significant numbers nor moved to emancipate the millions of African slaves they held” (553). Though Whitney does not deny that the novel accomplished significant cultural work, she argues that, “Stowe surely had little reason in the political climate of the early 1850s to believe” that her work would have the cultural impact attributed to it by twentieth-century critics such as Jane Tompkins (553). That Stowe herself feared an unwelcome outcome in the conflict over Kansas is suggested by
Russell’s claim that the opponents of slavery have already awoken too late to the threat posed by the slaveholder; those outside of the slaveholding elite, he asserts, have already become as slaves: “These men are our masters; they are yours; they are mine; they are masters of everybody in these United States. They can crack their whips over the head of any statesman or clergyman, from Maine to New Orleans, that disputes their will” (465). “The preservation of this system, whole and entire, is to be the policy of the leaders of this generation,” Russell concludes. “The fact is, they stand where it must be their policy. They must spread it over the whole territory. They must get the balance of power in the country, to build themselves up against the public opinion of mankind” (466).

The lengths to which slavery’s supporters were willing to go to claim power and ensure the extension of the “peculiar institution” became evident on the ground in Kansas. Despite a vigorous lobbying effort on the part of Stowe and other antislavery opponents, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed on May 26, 1854. As Joan Hedrick writes, “The stage was now set for the bloody struggles in Kansas that were the first battles of the Civil War. ‘Popular sovereignty’ meant letting the settlers in Kansas fight among themselves to determine whether the territory should be free or slave” (257). Indeed, violence and intimidation were inextricable from the political process in Kansas. During the territorial elections in March 1855, pro-slavery Missourians swarmed into Kansas to stuff ballots and suppress the anti-slavery vote. The pro-slavery side won the day, though officials later determined that only about 500 of the 5,427 ballots cast in their favor had been cast legally (Wilentz Rise 686). After a pro-slavery government was established, the anti-slavery majority in Kansas took to disobeying the laws passed by what they rightly deemed to be an
illegitimate government. Meanwhile, donations of Sharps rifles began to pour in from New England (687).

Stowe’s family was soon swept up in the controversy over Kansas. In early 1856, Harriet’s brother, Henry Ward Beecher, traveled from Brooklyn to New England, where he found their father, Lyman Beecher, speaking out against the injustices perpetrated in Kansas (Wilentz Rise 688). In March, Henry himself spoke in New Haven at the United Church, which, like many churches and antislavery organizations, had organized a group of settlers who would travel to Kansas and, through the vote or through violence, tilt the balance of power toward the antislavery side. Swept up in the spirit of the meeting, Beecher vowed to support the abolitionist settlers by committing his church to providing twenty-five rifles. As Wilentz reports,

In a few days, more than six hundred dollars was collected, and the rifles were shipped off (along with twenty-five copies of holy scripture) in a crate marked “Bibles.” Beecher, back in Brooklyn, was embarrassed when critics called the rifle shipments “Beecher’s Bibles” and his congregation “the Church of the Holy Rifle,” but he stood by his claim that, in Kansas, “self-defense is a religious duty.” (688)

By that time, an opposition government had formed, so that Kansas had dueling, pro- and anti-slavery governments (687). Following the murder of a free-state supporter by pro-slavery forces, violence picked up between the two camps (687). On May 21, 1856, pro-slavery Missourians and Kansans set upon Lawrence, burning the Free State Hotel and the home of the free state governor (689). Though certainly an attempt to win Kansas for the slaveholders once and for all, the sacking of Lawrence was also a more symbolic act of defiance: as Wilentz explains, “Atop the gutted offices of the Herald of Freedom [an anti-slavery paper in Lawrence] flew a bright red flag with a star in its center, the slogan ‘Southern Rights’ inscribed on one side and ‘South Carolina’ on the other” (689).
The relevance of events in “Bleeding Kansas” to Stowe’s *Dred* is evident by two types of pointed references to Kansas in the novel. In the first, Stowe compares Tom Gordon’s demagogic manipulation of the mob, which he whips into frenzy prior to the slave hunt, with the speechifying that incited the destruction of Lawrence. As we shall see, Tom Gordon, the chief representative of the degenerate South in the novel, factors prominently in Stowe’s indictment of the South on grounds that, by refuting the principles of republican government and moral education central to the nation’s founding philosophy, it has squandered its Revolutionary heritage. To be sure, Stowe draws the North in for criticism as well, particularly for its complicity in enacting the Fugitive Slave Law (233); as Harry declares, “‘The North is just as bad as the South! They kill us, and the North consents and justifies! And all their wealth, power, and religion, are used against us. We are the ones all sides are willing to give up’” (500). Despite these criticisms, the overall effect of Stowe’s novel is to suggest that the source of the corrupting influence upon the nation’s institutions—and thus the source of the nation’s moral stagnation—lies in the South. As David C. Miller asserts of *Dred*, “The national scope [Stowe] had maintained so well in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [h]as narrowed, and her tone now often border[s] on invective” (96). Indeed, the bitter sarcasm evident in the second half of “The Altar of Freedom” comes to the forefront in *Dred*.

This transition in Stowe’s rhetoric stems partly from her sense that the Slave Power has begun extending its tyranny over whites as well as blacks; as she writes, “we have begun to drink the cup of trembling which for so many ages has been drank alone by the slave” (499). Stowe makes this assertion in a passage, deep into her novel, in which she writes of the anguish of the maroon community in the swamp after learning of the death of one of its own, Hark. Hark had been captured by Tom Gordon and the mob and, as he was suspected
of communicating with the fugitives, was whipped and tortured for information about their whereabouts (457-58). Stowe communicates Harry’s suffering upon receiving the news of Hark’s death:

How stinging is it at such a moment to view the whole respectability of civilized society upholding and glorifying the murderer; calling his sin by soft names, and using for his defence every artifice of legal injustice! Some in our own nation have had bitter occasion to know this, for we have begun to drink the cup of trembling which for so many ages has been drank alone by the slave. Let the associates of Brown ask themselves if they cannot understand the midnight anguish of Harry! (499)

Stowe’s reference in the final sentence, of course, is to John Brown, who, in October 1855, arrived in the battleground of Kansas (Reynolds Brown 132-37). Given the horrific acts of violence that Brown would oversee in Kansas, Stowe’s expression of sympathy for the abolitionist may seem surprising. In contrast to the majority of those New Englanders who poured into Kansas—who, though eager to check the spread of slavery, were equally keen on acquiring potentially profitable land—Brown saw Kansas as the field upon which to strike a blow against the Slave Power. On the night of May 24, 1856, Brown and six others stormed into the cabin of James Doyle, dragged Doyle and two of his sons outside, then savagely hacked at the men with their swords (172). Brown’s band proceeded on to two additional cabins, killing two more men in similar fashion, then took to the woods (172-3). Following the attack, two of Brown’s sons were captured, imprisoned, and tortured; a third son was killed in a subsequent battle at Osawatamie (179). In the fall, Brown left for New England to begin raising funds for his next assault on slavery (174).

It was during this tour of New England, David Reynolds asserts, that Brown began to cultivate the image of a persecuted figure that informs Stowe’s reference. “Although he spewed violent words against slavery,” Reynolds writes, Brown “knew the Pottawatamie killings would be a hard sell, even to those aware of his involvement in them. Instead of
trying to capitalize on them, therefore, he emphasized his afflictions during that chaotic summer” (179). In their revisionist history of the conflict, New Englanders convinced themselves that Brown had been incited to violence by the suffering and mistreatment of his sons—suffering that had in fact been inflicted as a consequence of the band’s butchering of the pro-slavery settlers (179).

Given his success in shaping a sympathetic self-image, it appears unlikely that Stowe fully understood Brown’s violent nature. She certainly could not have known the tremendous coincidence in her linking Brown with the maroons. As Reynolds explains, Brown’s next attack on the slave power—what would become the raid on Harper’s Ferry—would be modeled on the guerrilla warfare of the maroon communities of the South and the Caribbean islands of Jamaica and Haiti (106-7). Brown’s reading about the maroon communities, like his determination to live among free blacks and fugitives in North Elba, New York, demonstrated his commitment to racial equality (106-7, 125-30). Both Brown’s violence and his compassion distinguished him from the other members of the abolitionist camp; Brown pushed to the extremes the central tensions confronting the movement: between pacifism and violence, hierarchy and equality, colonization and integration. Though Stowe stifles the rebellion that appears to be the inevitable conclusion of the narrative, she does, over the course of the novel, engage with these tensions and provides a radical depiction of African American identity. As Gregg Crane suggests, the central questions guiding Stowe’s novel are: “Did the principles of the American Revolution entitle enslaved Americans to civil and political rights, including the right of revolution, and would a recognition of the natural rights of African Americans indicate that they were constituent members of the American community?” (“Dangerous Sentiments” 177). Whereas in Uncle
Tom’s Cabin Stowe introduced a black character, George Harris, who channels his revolutionary energies toward establishing a new African nation, in Dred Stowe authorizes her black characters to pose a direct threat to the corrupt, and fragile, American order. By exploring the mindset of the maroon, and plunging into the swamp that afforded him his revolutionary potential, Stowe arrives at a defense of the slave’s right to revolution and a condemnation of American tyranny. Having confirmed the slave’s undeniable claim—his inevitable compulsion—to revolt, Stowe must still grapple with the implications of such racially charged violence within the domestic space of the nation.

Stowe makes clear from the onset that her narrative is set in a society dissipated by its commitment to the slave system. Canema, the Gordon family plantation, had been established on “a large tract of the finest alluvial land”; since colonial times that land had passed down through the family, “whose wealth, for some years, seemed to increase with every generation” (37). In time, however, the Gordons’ reliance on slave labor sapped both the land and the family of their strength: “Slave labor, of all others the most worthless and profitless, had exhausted the first vigor of the soil, and the proprietors gradually degenerated from those habits of energy which were called forth by the necessities of the first settlers…” (37). Indeed, the regular cultivation of the plantations had, over the course of two centuries, leached nutrients from the land, compelling farmers to look westward for virgin soil. Stowe skillfully parallels the desiccation of the soil with the plantation owners’ moral degeneracy, which is evidenced by “that free-and-easy abandon, in which both master and slave appeared to have one common object—that of proving who should waste with most freedom” (37).
As Rachel Naomi Klein has written, Stowe’s critique of slavery is informed by “[h]er utopian vision of a free and democratic labor system” (135). Like Lincoln and the Republicans, Stowe assumed that “slavery and wage labor were fundamentally distinct and opposed systems” and that “slavery was intrinsically inefficient not only because it drained slaves and masters of incentive, but also because it denigrated the value of work among all sectors of the southern population” (137). In contrast, wage labor, they assumed, “was fair and free because it permitted workers to rise or fall to the level of their ability and moral character” (137). Significantly, then, Clayton’s initial plan for reforming the slave system from within entails introducing educational reform and “a graduated system of work and wages” to the plantation; the free labor system, he contends, “shall teach the nature and rights of property, and train to habits of industry and frugality, by making every man’s acquirements equal to his industry and good conduct” (23-24). “There is a wonderful and beautiful development locked up in this Ethiopian race,” Clayton exclaims while informing Frank Russell of his plans, “and it is worth being a life-object to unlock it” (23-24). On his plantation, he tells Russell, “[t]he raising of cotton is to be the least of the thing. I regard my plantation as a sphere for raising men and women, and demonstrating the capabilities of the race” (24).

Replacing the chattel system with wage labor, Clayton asserts, is in the best interest of both slave and slave owner; as he tells his father, his hope is that plantation owners will eventually see “the superior cheapness and efficiency of the system of free labor…” (394). Judge Clayton, who, like Russell, offers a realist counterpoint to Edward’s idealistic plans, argues that the slave system will endure because of the slave owner’s self-interest:

“The trouble is,” said Judge Clayton, “that the system, though ruinous in the long run to communities, is immediately profitable to individuals.
Besides this, it is a source of political influence and importance. The holders of slaves are an aristocracy supported by special constitutional privileges. They are united against the spirit of the age by a common interest and danger, and the instinct of self-preservation is infallible. No logic is so accurate.” (394)

The aristocratic vestiges of Southern society, Stowe argues, give rise to an anti-democratic segregation of classes, such that the upper class is ignorant of or indifferent to the sufferings of both slaves and poor whites; additionally, slavery spawns a legal culture stressing patriarchal benevolence, to the exclusion of providing equal protections under the law.15 Especially after the rush of state constitutional revisions during the early nineteenth century, these preferences began to appear outmoded and at odds with the nation’s democratic ethos. In particular, South Carolina’s constitution, which essentially confirmed the low-country planters as an oligarchy, seemed horribly out-of-step with the times.16

These unequal political preferences, Stowe suggests, are an outgrowth of poor education. Tom Gordon is the figure who best embodies the dangers of the slave system. Tom’s flaws, Stowe asserts, are not inherent to his character; rather, “Nature had endowed [Tom] with no mean share of talent, and with that perilous quickness of nervous organization, which, like fire, is a good servant, but a bad master” (39). Borrowing from the language of Revolutionary-era discourses on pedagogy, Stowe maintains that plantation life has cultivated only the worst aspects of Tom’s character:

Out of those elements, with due training, might have been formed an efficient and eloquent public man; but, brought up from childhood among the servants to whom his infant will was law, indulged during the period of infantile beauty and grace in the full expression of every whim, growing into boyhood among slaves with but the average amount of plantation morality, his passions developed at a fearfully early time of life; and, before his father thought of seizing the reins of authority, they had gone out of his hands forever. (39)
As Jay Fliegelman has ably illustrated, Revolutionary ideology emerged in concert with educational theories that postulated that parental education should develop the child’s reason and restraint, and thereby make authority and liberty compatible—a revolution in notions of authority that corresponded with political movements to replace absolute monarchy with a constitutionally authorized government (13-14). By organizing its society in accordance with the slave labor system, the South has imperiled not only its moral and economic well-being, but also crippled its ability to produce productive citizens. Tom’s education should have provided him with the “knowledge and control of himself” necessary to become a “public man” and citizen (Dred 39). Instead, due to the hierarchical organization of plantation society, in which even the children of the plantation owner are free to tyrannize over their servants and slaves, Tom has become a lawless figure thirsting for power. Further, “[t]he history of Tom Gordon,” Stowe laments, “is the history of many a young man grown up under the institutions and in the state of society which formed him” (39).

As Crane argues, Tom Gordon, like Simon Legree, champions a “positivistic vision” of authority; these characters “speak of law and all types of human relation as governed by power, which [Stowe] represents in the synecdoche of the fist or hand….” (“Dangerous Sentiments” 196). “In Gordon’s positivistic vision,” Crane continues, “the helplessness of the slave class…underwrites the actuality of power and domination, and the undeniable reality of the unequal distribution of power is the sole necessary justification for its exercise” (198). After Tom takes possession of Canema he wields his authority with impunity. His power as master entitles him not only to the labor and obedience of his slaves but also to the possessions of his half-sister, the mixed-race Cora Gordon, and the body of Harry’s wife,
Lisette. In applying physical force and the law to meet his needs and desires, Tom declares his view that slavery is not a benevolent institution but instead an exercise in power:

“Confound it all!” said Tom Gordon, “teach them that you’ve got the power!—teach them the weight of your fist! That’s enough for them. I am bad enough, I know; but I can’t bear hypocrisy. I show a fellow my pistol. I say to him, You see that, sir! I tell him, You do so and so, and you shall have a good time with me. But, you do that, and I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life! That’s my short method with niggers, and poor whites, too.” (161)

Though others shy away from Tom’s coarse defense of his policies, Stowe makes clear that Southern society ultimately relies on positivistic expressions of power to maintain the master’s tenuous control over the slave.

The master’s need for absolute authority over the slave fundamentally reshapes the function of the law within a slave owning society. Stowe’s investigation of the principles guiding court rulings that comment on the nature of the master-slave relationship dates back at least as far as her composition of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). In the second half of that work, Stowe devotes particular attention to examining Judge Thomas Ruffin’s decision in *State v. Mann*, which was tried before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1829 (Crane “Dangerous Sentiments” 194-95). Stowe would later fictionalize the case—which considered the rights of a slaveholder in regard to their property when that property was let out to another individual—in *Dred*; moreover, Stowe would virtually reproduce Ruffin’s decision in the text of her novel. The fundamental principle of the ruling is that “THE POWER OF THE MASTER MUST BE ABSOLUTE, TO RENDER THE SUBMISSION OF THE SLAVE PERFECT” (353). Judge Clayton (the fictional stand-in for Ruffin) declares that such a principle is the natural conclusion of the conflicting theories of authority and education that inform the spheres of the citizen and the slave. “‘In the one,’” Clayton determines, “‘the end in view is the happiness of the youth born to equal rights with that
governor on whom the duty devolves of training the young to usefulness, in a station which he is afterwards to assume among freemen. To such an end, and with such a subject, moral and intellectual instruction seem the natural means…. Moderate force is superadded only to make the others effectual”’ (353). The goal of such an education, according to Fliegelman, is a union of authority and liberty—the conditions necessary for the functioning of democracy. (Tom Gordon, of course, serves as a negative example of what can happen when the educational system lacks sufficient force to moderate a youth’s impulses.) As Clayton explains,

“With slavery it is far otherwise. The end is the profit of the master, his security, and the public safety; the subject, one doomed, in his own person and his posterity, to live without knowledge, and without the capacity to make anything his own, and to toil that another may reap the fruits. …Such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body. There is nothing else which can operate to produce the effect.” (353)

Born to submission rather than freedom, the slave is entitled to none of the liberties or protections granted the citizen. The principle of consent held so sacred by Lincoln has no place in Ruffin’s ruling. As Crane explains, “Having set aside any moral challenge to the law of slavery, Ruffin frankly acknowledges the law to be an instrument of factional power” (“Dangerous Sentiments” 195).17 As the preservation of the master’s authority is the ultimate goal of a slaveholding society, his authority must be absolute.

What intrigued Stowe about Ruffin’s decision is the judge’s explicit discussion of the conflict observed by Crane: between moral principle and the purpose of the law. “‘I most freely confess my sense of the harshness of this proposition,’” Clayton/Ruffin states of the absolute submission of the slave. “‘I feel it as deeply as any man can. And, as a principle of moral right, every person in his retirement must repudiate it. But, in the actual condition of things, it must be so. There is no remedy. The discipline belongs to the state of slavery.
They cannot be disunited without abrogating at once the rights of the master, and absolving the slave from his subjection.” (353-54). Stowe writes of this admission in A Key:

No one can read this decision, so fine and clear in expression, so dignified and solemn in its earnestness, and so dreadful in its results, without feeling at once deep respect for the man and horror for the system. The man, judging him from this short specimen, which is all the author knows, has one of that high order of minds, which looks straight through all verbiage and sophistry to the heart of every subject which it encounters. He has, too, that noble scorn of dissimulation, that straightforward determination not to call a bad thing by a good name, even when most popular and reputable and legal, which it is to be wished could be more frequently seen, both in our Northern and Southern States. There is but one sole regret; and that is that such a man, with such a mind, should have been merely an expositor, and not a reformer of law. (qtd. in Whitney 561).

Given the master’s need for absolute control over the slave, Southerners are quick to bend their institutions to meet the needs of the slave system. While maintaining control on the plantation falls to the overseer, “[t]he constant effort to recover…fugitives has led to the adoption, in these states, of a separate profession, unknown at this time in any other Christian land—hunters, who train and keep dogs for the hunting of men, women, and children” (210). Ben Dakin, “a mighty hunter…[with] the best pack of dogs within thirty miles round,” makes his home “[o]n the edge of the swamp, a little beyond Tiff’s cabin….” (233). Dakin is a peripheral figure in society but one who is essential to its preservation; he enforces the slave code, which authorizes him to kill any slave absent from the plantation for a longer than permissible period of time. His instrumentality is apparent by “his advertisements, still to be seen standing in the papers of his native state, [which] detailed with great accuracy the precise terms on which he would hunt down and capture any man, woman, or child, escaping from service and labor in that country” (233).

Another peripheral figure, the white shop owner Abijah Skinflint, becomes a victim of mob violence for suspicion that he has contributed to the destabilization of the plantation
owners’ authority. Following his injury at the hands of Dred, Tom Gordon directs his violent response at Abijah. The poor white shopkeepers, including Abijah, “are never particularly scrupulous, provided they can turn a penny to their own advantage,” Stowe explains; consequently, they transact business with the maroon community, “and willingly supply necessary wares in exchange for game, with which the swamp abounds” (212). Skinflint, Tom concludes, “must have sold the powder and ammunition to the negroes in the swamp. This may have been true, or may not,” Stowe adds; “but, in cases of lynch-law, such questions are indifferent matter” (504). With a mob at his back, Tom oversees “a raid on Abijah’s shop,” during which “the mob, having helped themselves to his whiskey…amused themselves by tarring and feathering him; and, having insulted and abused him to their satisfaction, and exacted a promise from him to leave the state within three days, they returned home glorious in their own eyes” (504). In countenancing the mob’s attack on Abijah, the larger community within the novel reveals its hypocrisy: “The respectable people in the neighborhood first remarked that they didn’t approve of mobs in general, and then dilated, with visible satisfaction, on this in particular.” (504). Preserving slavery would always be the first order of business, democracy and justice be damned. By tarring and feathering Abijah, the mob makes its case that any exchange between white and black not built upon the assumption of the white’s superiority is un-American.

Southerners’ willingness to bend their institutions to the necessities of slavery also extends to religion, a state of affairs most pointedly suggested by father Bonnie, who declares, “I thank the Lord that I am delivered from the bondage of thinking slavery a sin, or an evil, in any sense” (427). It is in her discussions of the religious defenders of slavery that Stowe hammers home the contortions of logic and perversity of principle that emerge
from the slave system. The need to defend the status quo, Stowe informs her readers, has led to the splintering of the Presbyterian Church; it has misled believers into thinking that religious or political union is more important than justice; and it has perverted Christian resignation into an abdication of social responsibility.  

Stowe’s shift from championing Christian passivity to considering the viability of revolutionary violence has been rationalized as an angry response to the increasing stridency of slavery’s defenders. The South’s determination to never relinquish its claim to the slave’s labor took horrific form in Preston Brooks’s attack on Charles Sumner upon the Senate floor during May of 1856. In response to Sumner’s speech of two days previous, on “The Crime Against Kansas,” Brooks clubbed Sumner senseless with his cane (Wilentz Rise 690-1). Brooks, a congressman from South Carolina, took exception not only to the antislavery message of Sumner’s address but to the senator’s unflattering characterization of a South Carolina senator and relation of Brooks (687-88). Though many Southerners responded with glee, people from across the country responded to news of the attack with horror. In New York, William Cullen Bryant wrote in the Evening Post, “Has it come to this, that we must speak with bated breath in the presence of our Southern masters? …Are we too, slaves, slaves for life, a target for their brutal blows, when we do not comport ourselves to please them?” (qtd. in Wilentz Rise 691).

The parallels between British tyranny and that of slave owners could not be more apparent. The atrocities committed in Kansas and on the floor of the Senate did have an influence on the composition of Dred; as Stowe wrote in a June 1856 letter, “The book is written under the impulse of our stormy times; how the blood & insults of Sumner and the sack of Lawrence burn within us I hope to make a voice to say” (qtd. in Hedrick 258). A
number of factors—foremost among them Dred’s sudden appearance some two hundred
pages into the novel—have led critics to postulate that, in the midst of composing the novel,
Stowe dramatically changed the course of her narrative in response to these violent acts. (In
many ways, these conjectures parallel the popular narrative of Melville’s transforming his
work-in-progress, _Moby-Dick_ (1851), upon discovering Hawthorne.) More accurate,
perhaps, is Robert Levine’s contention that the critical response from black abolitionists to
_Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ forced Stowe to further reckon with the rights of the slave and his future
within the United States. For Levine, Frederick Douglass’s appropriations of, and
occasionally chiding response to, Stowe’s novel, are key to this transformation; moreover,
Douglass’s “Heroic Slave”—itself a literary response to _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_—prodded
Stowe toward a consideration of black militancy. *20* During their very public debate over the
merits of Stowe’s novel, Douglass had written to Martin Delany, “We shall not…allow the
sentiments put in the brief letter of GEORGE HARRIS, at the close of Uncle Tom’s Cabin,
to vitiate forever Mrs. Stowe’s power to do us good. Who doubts that Mrs. Stowe is more an
abolitionist than when she wrote that chapter?” (qtd in Levine _Delany_ 82-83). *21* “And
perhaps she _was_ ‘more of an abolitionist,’” Levine continues:

> perhaps she _was_ stung by criticism from Douglass and other black (and
white) abolitionists, for that same month [March 1853, during which
Douglass wrote Stowe to remind her that “we are _here_ , and are likely to
remain”] she reportedly sent a note to the New York meeting of the
American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society declaring, in the paraphrased
words of the proceedings, “that if she were to write ‘Uncle Tom’ again, she
would not send George Harris to Liberia.” (83)

Jeannine DeLombard again points to _A Key_ as a pivotal text in the development of Stowe’s
thought between _Uncle Tom’s Cabin_ and _Dred_. As DeLombard asserts, in _A Key_ “Stowe
extensively cites and often reproduces long passages from the oral and written narratives of
such former slaves as Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Lunsford Lane, Lewis Clark,
Solomon Northrup, and Milly Edmundson” (“Representing” 101). Stowe’s references to and gleanings from slave narratives in this text served in part to validate the depiction of slavery found in Uncle Tom’s Cabin—and, according to William Andrews, constituted Stowe’s effort to retain representational authority over her black sources (182). DeLombard acknowledges Stowe’s tendency to slip into the problematic racial hierarchy of abolitionist discourse—in which the white author (or attorney) retains “exegetical authority” over black testimony23—yet also reads both A Key and Dred in light of Stowe’s contention in the latter work that

> We have been accustomed, even those of us who feel most, to look on the argument for and against the system of slavery with the eyes of those who are at ease. We do not even know how fair is freedom, for we were always free. We shall never have all the materials for absolute truth on this subject, till we take into account, with our own views and reasonings, the views and reasonings of those who have bowed down to the yoke, and felt the iron enter their souls. (445)

DeLombard views this passage, which echoes the terms with which Stowe pleads for sympathy at the close of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, as demonstrating a shift in Stowe’s hierarchical conception of white advocacy and black testimony:

> Here, however, in an implicit reference to her earlier novel, Stowe suggests that even those white abolitionists ‘who feel most’ have a narrow view of slavery if they do not take African-American ‘views and reasonings’ on the subject into account. Revealing the inadequacy of sympathetic white advocacy uninformed by black testimony, Dred thus represents a significant revision of Stowe’s approach to slavery and abolitionism. (“Representing” 100)

As Stowe explains (and as DeLombard notes), “add[ing]…to our estimate, the feelings and reasonings of the slave” means that the reader “must follow us…to the fastness in the Dismal Swamp” (445).
The swamp serves as a significant setting in Stowe’s novel—so much so that, in her subtitle, she dubs the book “A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp.” In bringing her characters—and her readers—to the swamp, Stowe is trading on a wide range of meanings that nineteenth-century Americans associated with the swamp. Set apart from society due to its danger and disorder, the swamp became a potent image in political debate. Daniel Webster, ever wary of the consequences of sectional strife, employed the swamp as a metaphor for disunion during an 1851 speech in Virginia: “…[S]ecession and disunion are a region of gloom, and morass and swamp,” Webster exhorted; “no cheerful breezes fan it, no spirit of health visits it; it is all malaria. It is all fever and ague. Nothing beautiful or useful grows in it; the traveler through it breathes miasma, and treads among all things unwholesome and loathsome” (qtd. in Miller 10). The largely negative connotations of the swamp that inform Stowe’s novel, rather than following Webster’s nationalist train of thought, emerged from “discourses of [regional] separateness that originate[d] in the North” and which forged intimate links between the swamp and Southern society (Wilson xvii). As David C. Miller explains, the swamp—a landscape “promising indolence and moral waywardness if not regression and reversion to savagery”—came to embody many Northerners’ fears of, and resentments toward, the South (75). Even among those opposed to civil rights, such concerns focused on the South’s commitment to slave labor. Many Yankees rooted their opposition to slavery not in any belief in equal rights for African Americans but rather in a belief that the slave system counteracted those traits, particularly diligence and self-control, that they most highly prized in themselves. From the (supposedly) morally upright and industrious North, the South began to look like a stagnating backwater. Consequently, abolitionists took to “us[ing] the swamps as apt metaphors for a civilization in moral and cultural decay” (Wilson 22).
initial descriptions of the swamp, Stowe seizes upon the negative connotations of the swamp’s wildness while implicitly associating such qualities with the South:

The reader who consults the map will discover that the whole Eastern shore of the Southern States, with slight interruptions, is belted by an immense chain of swamps, regions of hopeless disorder, where the abundant growth and vegetation of nature, sucking up its forces from the humid soil, seems to rejoice in a savage exuberance, and bid defiance to all human efforts either to penetrate or subdue. (209)

In keeping with her negative portrayal of Southern society, Stowe thus posits the swamp—and, by extension, the South—as the “antithesis of civilization” (Miller 78).

The swamp’s opposition to society carries with it positive associations as well. As Miller explains, the wild fecundity of the swamp has traditionally led artists to “locate that landscape on the underside of patriarchal culture, dominated by the body, materiality, corruption, infection, sexuality, and irrationality—but also origin and creativity” (9). These contradictory impulses of repulsion and attraction constitute the swamp’s “subversive ambiguity”: though a place of exile, the swamp also “offer[s] the means for developing a world apart from civilization or at least for bringing about a significant adjustment in the traditional relationship between nature and culture” (2). In its wildness, the swamp “could embody heretofore-unsanctioned types of experience and feeling”—including the unfettered individuality of Dred (Miller 4).

Stowe’s Dred is a memorable example of the Maroon, a literary figure, Anthony Wilson explains, who, “with his power, ferocity, and stylized, elemental ‘Africanness,’ became both Southern bogeyman and abolitionist icon” (12). Particularly following Nat Turner’s rebellion, imaginative links were forged in American culture between the fugitive slave and the swamp. In one regard, the specter of the slave lurking in the swamp served as a constant reminder of the master’s tenuous control over his property; as Stowe writes, “the
near proximity of the swamp has always been a considerable check on the otherwise absolute power of the overseer” (210). In another sense, the slave’s willingness to try his fate in the inhospitable swamp illustrated his determination to be free. As a fictionalized representative of Turner—and the son of another prominent rebel, Denmark Vesey—Dred serves both of these ends, emerging from the swamps to guide fellow fugitives to safety and celebrating his freedom in the face of Harry’s tribulations. Whereas Harry’s commitments to Nina and those on the plantation circumscribe his sphere of action, Dred revels in the freedom of the swamp:

“Go! you are a slave! But, as for me, “ he said, drawing up his head, and throwing back his shoulders with a deep inspiration, “I am a free man! Free by this,” holding out his rifle. “Free by the Lord of hosts, that numbereth the stars, and calleth them forth by their names. Go home—that’s all I have to say to you! You sleep in a curtained bed.—I sleep on the ground, in the swamps! You eat the fat of the land. I have what the ravens bring me! But no man whips me!—no man touches my wife!—no man says to me, ‘Why do ye so?’ Go! you are a slave!—I am free!” (199-200)

The swamp later becomes a site of revolutionary potential for other black characters in addition to Dred. As Tom Gordon’s reign of terror escalates, Harry and other hands from the plantations converge upon Dred’s enclave in the swamp. Significantly, Dred has Harry mark the arrival of their comrades by reading the Declaration of Independence. The purpose of this exercise, Dred asserts, is to determine which party—the American revolutionaries or the fugitive community—has more truly been the victim of tyranny: “‘Harry,’ said Dred, ‘when they come to-night, read them the Declaration of Independence of these United States, and then let each one judge of our afflictions, and the afflictions of their fathers, and the Lord shall be judge between us.’” (451). When they arrive, Harry leads them through a recitation of Revolutionary history—a history that they all know because of the annual Fourth of July celebrations:
“Brethren, I wish to explain to you to-night the story that they celebrate. It was years ago that this people was small, and poor, and despised, and governed by men sent by the King of England, who, they say, oppressed them. Then they resolved that they would be free, and govern themselves in their own way, and make their own laws. For this they were called rebels and conspirators; and, if they had failed, every one of their leaders would have been hung, and nothing more said about it. When they were agreeing to do this, they met together and signed a paper, which was to show to all the world the reason why. You have heard this read by them when the drums were beating and the banners flying. Now hear it here, while you sit on the graves of men they have murdered!” (455)

In this moment, when Harry has recontextualized the story of America’s founding, the full revolutionary potential of Dred’s act of judgment becomes clear. Whereas other abolitionist texts asserted that the slave, rather than the American patriot, had the greater claim as an aggrieved party, Stowe’s rebel slaves make explicit the revolutionary threat only hinted at by George Harris. “‘Haven’t I heard your Fourth-of-July speeches?’” George asks. “‘Don’t you tell us all, once a year, that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed? Can’t a fellow think, that hears such things? Can’t he put this and that together, and see what it comes to?’” (185). Gathered around the graves of their comrades, Harry’s reading of the Declaration demonstrates “‘what it comes to’”: his oration is an incitement to violence.

“Brothers,” said Harry, “you have heard the grievances which our masters thought sufficient to make it right for them to shed blood. They rose up against their king, and when he sent his armies into the country, they fired at them from the windows of the houses, and from behind the barns, and from out of the trees, until they were strong enough to get together an army, and fight them openly.” (455)

Rather than simply a recitation of history, Harry’s speech confirms the guerilla tactics of the maroon community as a just response to their oppression. By representing Harry’s reluctant but principled embracing of violence; by supporting Harry’s assertion of the right to revolution through ample black testimony against slavery; and by picturing Tom Gordon’s
abdication of republican governance, Stowe decides the case between slave holder and slave strongly in favor of the latter.

On the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown and his multi-racial band of soldiers descended on Harper’s Ferry and quickly gained control of the federal arsenal (Reynolds Brown 307-311). Brown’s plan had been to dispatch some of his troops to nearby farms from which they would recruit slaves to join the free nation—or maroon community—that they would found in the mountains (311-2). From this base of strength, the group would conduct further hit-and-run raids on plantations, spreading fear and insurrection throughout the South (249). The first farm to which Brown dispatched his men belonged to Colonel Lewis Washington, a relation of General George Washington (311). Though Colonel Washington’s slaves would aid their cause, Brown had a more symbolic purpose in sending his men to the farm. As David Reynolds reports, “Brown knew that among Colonel Washington’s possessions were two emblematic heirlooms: a sword that Washington’s great-granduncle, the first president, had reportedly received as a gift from Frederick the Great, as well as a pistol that had been given to the president by the Marquise de Lafayette, the French general who had aided America during the Revolution” (130). Brown had conceived of these objects as the centerpieces in a historic role-reversal: the Colonel, who was taken hostage, was required to surrender these artifacts to a black member of Brown’s band, Osborne Anderson (130). According to Reynolds, Brown “[in] effect…was putting Nat Turner in control of George Washington—an astonishing feat, even though it proved only temporary” (131).
After the Harpers Ferry raid was put down, leaving seventeen dead, Northerners, shocked by Brown’s actions, quickly denounced him. The *New York Evening Post* declared Brown’s a “fanatical enterprise,” a product of madness derived from the brutality of Kansas (qtd. in Reynolds *Brown* 339). William Lloyd Garrison provided one of the more complementary readings of the raid in *The Liberator*: it was “a misguided, wild, and apparently insane, though disinterested and well intended affair” (qtd. in Reynolds *Brown* 339-340). Brown’s former associates—particularly those implicated in the papers and communications found among Brown’s belongings—disavowed their connections to the revolutionary and fled from prosecution. Frederick Douglass, who had denied Brown’s plea to join him at Harper’s Ferry, made haste for Canada and thence to England. “In the Charles Town jail,” Reynolds writes, “John Brown calmly awaited martyrdom. His closest backers in the North did not share his passion for self-sacrifice” (341).

Confronted with the reality of Brown’s violence and the revolutionary potential it held, Northern whites recoiled. Those who later celebrated Brown more often than not celebrated his words, the story that he told of his purpose and his mission, rather than his deeds; Brown’s hanging, rather than his violent seizing of the arsenal, would be the basis of the abolitionist rallying cry (Reynolds 334-5). The logical extension of Brown’s method, many concluded, was civil war—still a largely unpopular prospect in 1859. Two years previous, Harriet Beecher Stowe had brought herself, and her readers, to the verge of imagining violence of the sort that Brown unleashed. The threatened revolution never breaks. Many critics attribute this failure to the clash between Dred’s and Milly’s visions of divine justice, and claim that Stowe cannot move beyond the same belief in Christian passivity that informs *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. DeLombard places the blame with Clayton and
reads the failure of the rebellion in a larger context in which white advocacy hinders, rather than aids, black resistance. Prior to Dred’s death, Clayton himself offers a negative prediction for the rebellion in his response to Harry’s letter. In that letter, composed just subsequent to his flight into the swamp, Harry declares, “I am now an outcast...for no crime, as I can see, except resisting oppression” (435). Unlike the American revolutionaries, Harry has not been granted the right of revolution. Yet the natural consequence of the Declaration—and its public readings within ear-shot of the slaves—is rebellion. “Denmark Vesey was a man!” Harry insists. “His history is just what George Washington’s would have been, if you had failed. What set him in his course? The Bible and your Declaration of Independence” (435). “Now, what do you make of that? This is read to us, every Fourth of July. It was read to Denmark Vesey and Peter Poyes, and those other brave, good men, who dared to follow your example and your precepts” (436). In Harry’s mind—and in Stowe’s text—the impending revolution is unavoidable. “[W]hatever my future course may be,” Harry declares in closing, “remember my excuse for it is the same as that on which your government is built” (436).

In his response to Harry, Clayton is willing to concede the right to revolt:

“I admit your right, and that of all men, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I admit the right of an oppressed people to change their form of government, if they can. I admit that your people suffer under greater oppression than ever our fathers suffered. And, if I believed that they were capable of obtaining and supporting a government, I should believe in their right to take the same means to gain it. But I do not, at present; and I think, if you will reflect on the subject, you will agree with me. I do not think that, should they make an effort, they would succeed. They would only embitter the white race against them, and destroy that sympathy which many are beginning to feel for their oppressed condition.” (442)
The failure of the revolution to materialize is not a question of the slave’s rights, nor is it a matter of his lacking courage. Rather, the battle is lost when the Clayton declares that he will not fight.

Having established, in his mind, that self-interest is the governing force of man, Russell asks of Clayton, “Now, when you see what a poor hoax human nature is, what’s the use of bothering? The whole race together aren’t worth a button, Clayton, and self-sacrifice for such fools is a humbug. That’s my programme!” (466). The selfishness and elitism underlying Russell’s repudiation of republican self-sacrifice clearly suggest that Stowe intends to portray him in an unflattering light. Yet, it is not altogether clear if his conclusion is pure cynicism or rather a realistic rendering of the prospects for reform in the South. Similarly, though Russell has shown his true colors, his final question to Clayton cannot be so easily dismissed: “‘Now, Clayton, I want to ask you one question. Can you fight? Will you fight? Will you wear a bowie-knife and pistol, and shoot every fellow down that comes at you?’” (467). When Clayton answers negatively, Russell asserts, “‘Then, my dear sir, you shouldn’t set up for a reformer in Southern states’” (467).
The paper remained on a rocky financial footing; in 1860, Douglass suspended publication and for the next three years issued a monthly paper (Philip Foner “Editor” 1: 87-91).

As Gordon Wood explains, “The sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution” (Creation 53).

According to Bailyn, “the preservation of liberty rested on the ability of the people to maintain effective checks on the wielders of power, and hence in the last analysis rested on the vigilance and the moral stamina of the people” (59).

As Gregg D. Crane summarizes, “the persistence of the law of slavery and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 raised doubts as to whether American law was based on moral principle or the self-interest of the politically and economically powerful” (“Dangerous Sentiments” 176).

The paper’s motto is taken from Webster’s “Second Speech on Foot’s Resolution” (1830). See Levine, “Explanatory Notes,” 612.

As Wilentz writes, “[t]he law’s attacks on civil liberties and individual conscience, and its extraterritorial implications, seemed, at least momentarily, to awaken new concerns about Northerner’s rights” (Rise 651). Wilentz’s catalogue of the constitutional arguments against the law is extensive: “the new Fugitive Slave Law compelled ordinary northerners to participate in slave recoveries, on pain of fine and imprisonment, and placed heavy penalties on any found guilty of aiding runaway slaves—in effect turning the entire northern population, black and white, into one large slave patrol. By denying the fugitives jury trials, it attacked the most democratic aspect of American jurisprudence—one that, according to the lawyers that defended the fugitives, brazenly violated the Fifth Amendment’s due process clause. The law carried across state lines, and by federal fiat, the full legitimacy of an institution still alive in the North in 1787, but since banned—restricting the prerogatives of the free states while edging toward declaring slavery a national, and not a local, institution. Why should federal power be extended, critics asked, to protect one special form of property to the exclusion of all others?” (Rise 651).

According to Crane, “Stowe derives her notion of sympathy in part from the moral sense philosophy central to the Founding Fathers’ republicanism. Sympathy was an important aspect of the faculty of moral insight, shared by the ploughman and the professor, as Thomas Jefferson put it, which authoritatively discerned the ethical norms upon which law must be based to be legitimate, but which, in any event, must be obeyed if one is to live morally” (“Stowe and the Law” 161).

Lincoln also echoes Stowe’s argument that the United States should be a model for others: “This declared indifference, but as I must think, covert real zeal for the spread of slavery, I cannot but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest” (58).

Slaveholders, Calhoun suggested, presented “the strongest counterweight to majoritarian democracy”; in national politics, they alone “had the intelligence and the will, as well as the material interest, to...keep the northern capitalists at bay” (qtd. in Wilentz Rise 537). As Bailyn makes clear, the republican pamphlets of the Revolution differed—sometimes considerably—in their conceptions of how interests should be balanced in the nation, and, consequently, what arrangements the government should take. As Bailyn writes of Common Sense, “the intellectual core of that brilliant pamphlet advocating the independence of the colonies was its attack on the...
traditional conception of balance as a prerequisite to liberty” (285). Paine’s plan for a unicameral legislature with a rotating presidency was widely denounced as excessively radical (286-7).

10 The international success of Uncle Tom’s Cabin furnished Stowe with a unique opportunity to advocate for the American slave. While abroad for a British and European tour from April through September 1853, Stowe was greeted both as a literary celebrity and as a representative of the antislavery movement in America. In England and Scotland collections were taken up for the aid of the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist cause in general, and presented to Stowe. Stowe was also the recipient of the “Penny Offering,” an effort to accommodate for the lack of copyright protections for an American author abroad. As Joan Hedrick explains, “this fund originated out of the idea that because Stowe reaped no English royalties from the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, each reader should contribute one penny to the author” (240). This campaign on the part of Stowe’s British audience constituted a major boon for Stowe as both an author and activist: “[u]ltimately [she] took home upwards of $20,000….“ (240).

Though Stowe’s dispersal of these funds—or, perhaps more accurately, her alleged failure to disperse them—created controversy, she did earmark portions of the Penny Offering for important political campaigns, including support for Frederick Douglass’s Paper and opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act under which the status of slavery in the territories would be determined by popular sovereignty (Hedrick 246-8, 256-7). When the bill first came up for debate, Stowe “urged women to petition, to organize lectures, and to pray, citing the example of the British’s women’s organization to outlaw the slave trade” (Hedrick 256). The stakes in the Kansas-Nebraska debate—which would effectively repeal the Missouri Compromise—Stowe realized, were national rather than regional, and risked opening the entire nation to the slave trade. “Women of the Free States!” Stowe wrote in the pages of the New York Independent; “the question is not, shall we remonstrate with slavery on its own soil, but are we willing to receive slavery into the free States and territories of the Union?” (qtd. in Hedrick 256). When, in March 1854, the bill, already passed by the Senate, went to the House, “Stowe engaged in direct action.” Hedrick writes: “Using money from the Penny Offering, she financed a signature-gathering blitz in the Northeast. …In less than two weeks the signatures of 3,050 clergymen were collected and sent to Congress,” where they were submitted by Senator Edward Everett (257). Despite vocal opposition from Stephen Douglas, “the agitation appeared to have an effect: on March 26 the House voted to send the Nebraska Bill to the Committee of the Whole, in effect consigning it to the bottom of the docket of bills. Stowe wrote to the Duchess of Sutherland explaining ‘in strictest confidence’ that it was money from the Penny Offering that allowed for such swift organizing to block the bill” (257). That block, however, was impermanent.

11 Stowe first asserts that Tom’s style or oratory will be familiar to “any one who has read the speeches of the leaders who presided over the sacking of Lawrence….“ (Dred 506). She later links the pro-slavery forces in Kansas and Tom’s gang in their display of “such exhibitions of liberty as were sufficient to justify all despots for putting it down by force for centuries to come” (Dred 526).

12 In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, George Harris’s revolutionary possibility is subsumed by his determination to join a nation, and accept a nationality, outside of the borders of the United States. In the letter he writes prior to his emigration to Liberia, George insists, “I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them!” (608). Rather, George determines to embrace all that is true to himself and anathema to American society: “It is with the oppressed, enslaved African race that I cast in my lot; and, if I wished anything, I would wish myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 608). “The desire and yearning of my soul,” George continues, “is for an African nationality. I want a people that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own; and where am I to look for it?” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 608).

13 As Don Doyle explains, repeated planting of cotton and tobacco had exhausted the soil in significant portions of the Carolinas as well as Virginia and the Chesapeake. The opening of Indian land in the West, including Alabama and Mississippi, during the 1830s inspired the westward surge of the cotton empire. Back east, many of the remaining farmers undertook “deliberate efforts at economic diversification” (58-59). Some Southern naturalists, including Edmund Ruffin, looked to the rich marl of the swamp as a solution to soil depletion and a means to revitalizing agriculture, which, Ruffin believed, “[h]eld the key to maintaining Southern civilization”—which, by implication, included the slave system (qtd. in Wilson 43-45).
The utopian aspects of Clayton’s plantation scheme correspond to Stowe’s overly idealized description of class relations in the North. As Nina, having experienced the northern working ethos during a visit to New Hampshire, testifies to her Uncle John, free labor in the North has effected just such improvement among the workers. Nina effuses, “But you ought to see the northern working people…Why, the Governors of the States are farmers, sometimes, and work with their own men. The brain and the hand go together, in each one—not one great brain to fifty pairs of hands” (Dred 219). In contrast to the degradation of poor whites in the South, Nina asserts that northern laborers are independent and unfettered: “There are no high and low classes there,” she claims. “Everybody works; and everybody seems to have a good time. […] Seems to me this is better than making slaves of all the working classes, or having any working classes at all” (Dred 219).

Nina’s uncle receives her news of a classless and egalitarian society in the North with skepticism: “How wise young ladies always are!” said Uncle John. ‘Undoubtedly the millennium is begun in New Hampshire!’” (Dred 219). As Klein explains, “free labor ideology was grounded in several highly questionable assumptions: first, that labor and capital shared the same basic interests, and second, that employers and employees were equal parties in the construction of contracts” (138).

Stowe, Klein asserts, held that “waged work, protected by the right to vote and equality under the law, would be a sufficient guarantor of equal opportunity” (138). The hierarchical relationships that inform plantation life bleed into politics, as evident by the elitism of Nina’s Uncle John. John defines his vision of class relations with the idea that the “upper classes ought to be considerate and condescending, and all that.” When Clayton challenges him—“Then you are no republican”—John responds, “Bless you, yes, I am! I believe in the equality of gentlemen, and the equal rights of well-bred people. That’s my idea of a republican” (Dred 289).

As Wilentz confirms, nearly all important state government positions were appointed by the “omnipotent” South Carolina legislature; these included the governor and lieutenant governor, attorney general, sheriffs and justices of the peace (Rise 727). The legislature also picked the state’s presidential electors, making South Carolina the last state with such a system (Rise 453). “Through gross malapportionment,” Wilentz writes, “the interests of the low-country squirearchy and its backcountry allies reigned supreme and unchecked. With statewide elections virtually nonexistent, political parties never really took root in South Carolina. Partyless politics in turn shielded local leaders from opposition while dampening popular interest and participation” (Rise 727). John C. Calhoun, who derided the equality principle of the Declaration as “the most dangerous of all political errors,” defended this constitutional system on the basis that it was the most truly republican of the state governments (qtd. in Crane “Dangerous Sentiments” 179).

Many critics have seized upon Stowe’s advocacy of sentiment in the conclusion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in arguing that Stowe distinguishes between “sympathy” and the law. They argue that she configures these two arenas as distinct and gendered spheres of action, and claim that she asserts that the former, rather than the latter, is the more effective vehicle for reform. The most clear example of sympathy’s triumph over the law, these critics contend, appears in the “In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man” chapter from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in which Senator and Mrs. Bird strike opposing stances on the morality of a fugitive slave law. Though the Senator seeks to quiet his wife’s protest by referring obliquely to the “great public interests involved” and by cautioning her that “we must put aside our private feelings,” Mrs. Bird counters her husband’s defense of the policy with heartfelt Christian doctrine: “Now, John,” she explains, “I don’t know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible: and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 144). Rather than stooping to political reasoning, Mrs. Bird counsels following the dictates of conscience: “I hate reasoning, John,—especially reasoning on such subjects. There’s a way you political folks have of coming round and round a plain right thing; and you don’t believe in it yourselves, when it comes to practice. I know you well enough, John. You don’t believe it’s right any more than I do; and you wouldn’t [obey the law] any sooner than I” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 145). Stowe immediately validates Mrs. Bird’s contention: confronted with the human costs of his policy when the fugitive Eliza arrives at his home, the Senator ultimately acts in defiance of the law (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 146-161). Yet, as Gregg Crane makes clear, the demarcation between sentiment and law suggested by this passage is illusory. “Mrs. Bird’s answer to her husband’s separate spheres argument…is disingenuous to the extent that it seems to separate the moral and legal areas of expertise,” Crane asserts. In truth, “[h]er objection to the Fugitive Slave Act accords with the Founding Fathers’ belief in a legal system grounded in virtue and
sanctioned by the citizenry’s moral sense” (“Stowe and the Law” 164). Considered within the larger context of her body of work, it becomes clear that Stowe “does not present this antithesis as final or inevitable. Instead, her stories work toward a merger of sentiment and law” (“Stowe and the Law” 154). Stowe builds her conception of the law on the principle of a “higher law”: a belief that “to be legitimate the law must be just” (156). Crane reads Stowe’s antislavery fiction as “[her] attempt to describe convincingly a moral authority for American law so deeply embedded in the national conscience that it is immune to the pull of factional self-interest and so emotionally galvanic that it can check the will of the powerful by moving Americans of good will to eradicate such tyrannies as slavery” (“Stowe and the Law”177).

18 Bonnie asserts biblical precedent for slavery when he asserts, “‘Why, is it not plain enough to any reader of the Bible, how the apostles talked to the slaves? They didn’t fill their heads with stuff about the rights of man’” (Dred 428). Clayton counters this assertion by claiming that “‘there is a difference between our position under a republican government…and that of the apostles, who were themselves slaves, and could do nothing about the laws. …We have the right to agitate, write, print, and speak, and bring up the public mind to the point of reform; and, therefore, we are responsible if unjust laws are not repealed’” (Dred 432). Whereas Bonnie disavows the egalitarian message of the Declaration (and the New Testament), he does embrace revolutionary violence. Bonnie strikes a reactionary posture that anticipates Abijah’s punishment when he declares, “‘For my part...I want union, I’m sure. I’d tar and feather those Northern abolitionists, if I could get at them!’” (Dred 427). Father Bonnie’s religion seems built upon power; rather than rising above the fray, Bonnie’s religion sinks to the depths of depravity of the mob. Significantly, however, Stowe’s denunciation of father Bonnie does not lead her to disavow the camp meeting as a valid expression of religious belief.

19 Stowe claims of the split within the Presbyterian Church, “the breach between the two sections was caused quite as much by the difference of feeling between the northern and southern branches on the subject of slavery, as by any doctrines of difference” (Dred 418). According to Christine Heyrman, “[The] hope of wooing gentry support, along with pressure from many of the lay faithful in their own churches...muted evangelical testimony against slavery. On this issue, the vanguard of opposition consisted mainly of clergymen who, even before the Revolution, sparred with laymen and —women who either owned or hoped to own slaves. By the 1780s, it was plain that the latter would have their way and that evangelical churches would shape their policies accordingly” (24). Distrust of evangelicals was rooted in “the ways in which Baptists and Methodists struck at those hierarchies that lent stability to their daily lives....” (Heyrman 26). In her critique of the slave codes, Stowe also attacks religion’s complicity in making immoral laws, asserting: “In olden times, the statute provided that the proclamation of outlawry should be published on a Sabbath day, at the door of any church or chapel, or place where divine service should be performed, immediately after divine service, by the parish clerk or reader” (Dred 241). Despite his brutal occupation and his occasional drinking, Dakin “considered himself quite as promising a candidate for the kingdom as any of the company who were going up to the camp-meeting. Had any one ventured to remonstrate with Ben against the nature of his profession, he would probably have defended it by pretty much the same arguments which modern theologians defend the institution of which it is a branch” (Dred 234).

20 Levine argues that “Douglass’s refusal to give up on Stowe for her racialist and colonizationist ideas—and even for her refusal to fund the black mechanics institute—speaks well for his prescient perception of the cultural forces that could impinge on even the most sympathetic of white Americans. His efforts to persuade Stowe to rethink her colonizationist stance and (through “The Heroic Slave”) her racism suggest that Douglass came to believe that the publication of a text—even one with so massive an authority as Uncle Tom’s Cabin—does not foreclose the possibility of dialogue between authors and readers, blacks and whites, oppressed and oppressors, when glimmers of natural sympathy can be discerned” (90).

21 Douglass’s “appropriative response” to Uncle Tom’s Cabin was part of a power play against Delany (Levine 90). “What is appealing about Douglass’s interactions with Stowe is his working assumption that he could shape her politics and actions”—in contrast to his relationship with Delany, with whom “he remains censorious and dismissive” (Levine 82).

22 Among the most notable examples of Stowe’s insensitivity in seeking to appropriate African American texts is her response to an overture from Harriet Jacobs. Rather than aid Jacobs with advice regarding the publication
of her narrative, Stowe hoped to use Jacobs’ narrative as further verification for her own fictions. As Hedrick explains, “Stowe’s behavior—an extreme example of insensitivity bred by class and skin privilege—was probably exacerbated by her sense of literary ‘ownership’ of the tale of the fugitive slave. Wedded to the notion that she ‘spoke for the oppressed, who cannot speak for themselves,’ she tried in this instance to appropriate the story of a former slave who could—and eventually did—speak for herself” (249). See Hedrick 248-9.

23 See DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 137.

24 Other examples of the Maroon character can be found in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* and in William Cooper Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*.

25 In his pamphlet, “Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragic Scene…,” published in New York in the wake of Turner’s revolt—indeed, while Turner continued to evade capture—Samuel Warner wrote of Turner’s life in the swamp: incredible that “there could be found an individual of the human species, who, rather than wear the goading yoke of bondage, would prefer becoming the voluntary subject of so great a share of want and misery!—but, such indeed is the love of liberty—the gift of God!” (qtd. in Miller 90). In Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent passes a fitful night and day in Snaky Swamp while awaiting a new hiding place (564-5). Despite the terrors of the swamp, she prefers her removal from the plantation: “even those large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized” (Jacobs 565). When her family encourages her to return to the plantation, Brent contends, “But such counsel had no influence with me. When I started upon this hazardous undertaking, I had resolved that, come what would, there should be no turning back. ‘Give me liberty, or give me death,’ was my motto” (Jacobs 552).

26 Dred’s taunting of Harry—which stems from Harry’s conciliation, which Dred associates with a New Testament form of Christianity—is particularly vicious in this passage: “Look here, Harry,” said the other, dropping from the high tone he at first used to that of common conversation, and speaking in bitter irony, “did your master strike you? It’s sweet to kiss the rod, isn’t it? Bend your neck and ask to be struck again!—won’t you? Be meek and lowly; that’s the religion for you! You are a slave, and you wear broadcloth, and sleep soft. By and by he will give you a fip to buy salve for those cuts! Don’t fret about your wife! Women always like the master better than the slave! Why shouldn’t they? When a man licks his master’s foot, his wife scorns him,—serves him right. Take it meekly, my boy! ‘Servants obey your masters.’ Take your masters old coats—take your wife when he’s done with her—and bless God that brought you under the light of the Gospel!” (Dred 199)

27 In a chapter titled “Jegar Sahadutha,” following the reading of the Declaration, the slaves recount their own experiences of slavery. DeLombard asserts: “Like the hundreds of slave narratives that were recorded and published in the antebellum period, the accumulated ‘narrations’ of these ‘dark witness[es]’ stand as a symbolic ‘heap of witness’ (the English translation of the chapter title) against the crime of slavery” (“Representing” 101). DeLombard associates the extralegal testimony of the fugitives with the literary device of the “juridical metaphor,” which she explains as “figur[ing] slavery as a crime, slaveholders as perpetrators and defendants, slaves as victims and eyewitnesses, and abolitionists as advocates for the slave” (86-87). “One of the most powerful manifestations of the antebellum tendency to understand slavery in specifically legal terms,” the juridical metaphor, DeLombard contends, is evident in abolitionist authors’ tendency to “cast their readers as jury members in a court of public opinion, called to try the case of slavery” (86-87). Among the more famous articulations of this practice that DeLombard points to are Douglass’s claim in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that the slave “system is now at the bar of public opinion…for judgment” and Harriet Jacobs’s desire “to add my testimony…to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (87). “The rise of literary abolitionism’s juridical metaphor,” DeLombard notes, coincided with antislavery lawyers’ determined efforts to assert the democratic authority of juries over the “arbitrary” and “tyrannous” power wielded by judges, especially such “atrocious” judges as John Kane, Edward G. Loring, and Roger B. Taney. In such a climate, the “verdict” rendered by the court of public opinion could serve in the cultural imaginary as a corrective to the unjust decisions rendered in actual courts of law. (88)
slavery in Virginia. “Although Stowe did not comment publicly on these events,” DeLombard notes, “she was in Boston during the Burns crisis, when the city was placed under a state of emergency and the buildings were draped with black crepe to protest Judge Edward G. Loring’s ruling” (84). In the wake of Loring’s decision, the legislature, at the behest of the people of Massachusetts, undertook to remove Loring from his position as Judge of Probate. Only the intervention of Governor Henry Gardner prevented Loring from being removed from his position.

Though the symbolic effort to nullify Loring’s ruling, like the legislative effort to punish the judge himself, failed, activists continued to believe that public pressure could bring about substantial change. Consequently, authors continued to employ the juridical metaphor as a means of encouraging black writers and their white audiences to continue to lift their voices in opposition to slavery. As DeLombard concludes, these expressions of protest instantiated new channels through which disenfranchised Americans could productively engage in political and legal discourse:

[A]t a time when African American, both enslaved and free, were denied the right to bring a suit or to testify against whites in most American courtrooms, North and South, the juridical metaphor, by casting slaves in the role of “eye-witness[es] to the cruelty” of slavery, enabled a privileged few to gain a hearing at what Douglas called “the bar of public opinion.” The juridical metaphor also endowed sympathetic white Northerners with the authority to speak out against slavery. (88)

As Stowe’s diptych suggests, authors were also capable of flipping the juridical metaphor on its head and taking on the part of the prosecuting attorney to challenge those readers who did not champion the moral cause in opposition to the law. Both of these approaches sought to increase the stock of testimony about the inhumanity of slavery.

28 Milly’s calls for patience from the rebellious fugitives echoes the message of Christian resignation from Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Dred first says on her approach “‘Woman, thy prayers withstand me!’”; at the close of the scene he says, “Woman, thy prayers have prevailed for this time. …The hour is not yet come!” (Dred 461; 462). The exchange indicates that the possibility of using violence still remains.
American Revolutionary history often has been wielded as a powerful check on social and political transformation. From antebellum Whigs who sought to strip the Revolution of any social character to modern conservatives who invoke the “Founding Fathers” while envisioning a monolithic culture whitewashed of religious or ethnic diversity, the effect of Revolutionary history has often been to blunt the effectiveness of campaigns for progressive reform. One need only consider Newt Gingrich’s recent proposal that schools use “patriotic stories” as a means to disseminate “traditional American values” to recognize how history has been employed as a counterweight to—or as clarion call for a conservative brand of—reform (95, xii). In Winning the Future: a 21st Century Contract with America (2005), Gingrich draws the battle lines of U.S. political culture in terms of historical consciousness, labeling liberals as those who, “in general…scorn American history…and agree with the New York Times,” while defending “Americans in the other camp who are proud of our history [and] know how integral God is to understanding American exceptionalism…” (xiv). Though most liberals do not “scorn American history,” their justifiable suspicion of the political ends sought in the name “American exceptionalism” has often resulted in their ceding claims to history to those on the right.

Prior to the Civil War, Revolutionary history provided a powerful impetus to those reformers who felt a burden not merely to preserve that history but rather to complete its work. By championing the rights of the many against the few, author-activists from George
Lippard to Frederick Douglass campaigned to reshape historical consciousness and, by extension, culture, such that the people maintained control over their institutions. By producing popular fictions that trumpeted their reformist messages while drawing upon the suggestive history and iconography of the Revolution these writers conducted a popular referendum by which citizen-readers could announce their allegiance to both sacred ideals and campaigns of patriotic dissent. Critics’ persistent critiques of American exceptionalism and its outcomes in the antebellum United States—from the campaign to erase American Indians from the landscape to the conquest of Mexican territory—have meant that the contestations over the uses of Revolutionary history have largely slipped through the cracks.

During the 1830s and 1840s, Revolutionary fictions provided a potent complement to the cause of labor and socialism, helping to invigorate campaigns for labor law reform and promote the organization of unions and cooperatives. Additionally, recent scholarship has served to shatter the widespread misconception that the Jacksonian Democratic Party, though strong in its defense of workers, consisted of a solid pro-slavery block; rather, working-class Democratic partisans such as William Leggett exerted great influence amongst white abolitionists and inspired several of the third-party campaigns of the period.¹ Increasingly during the late 1840s and 1850s abolitionists appropriated the iconography of the Revolution in their campaigns to establish the grounds for African American citizenship and to assert the right to revolution as a legitimate means of forcing an end to oppression. In some quarters, as within portions of the Free Soil party, opponents of class- and race-based oppression joined forces to forge formidable coalitions.

Over the course of the 1850s—and particularly following the outbreak of civil war—workers increasingly saw themselves and their cause as casualties of the nation’s reckoning
with slavery. Their anger crested with the Manhattan draft riots of July 1863 after 1,200 men—most too poor to pay for a substitute—were conscripted into the Union army (Reynolds Whitman 424). For many laborers the draft—and even the war itself—was “a tyrannical imposition of the government on behalf of black slaves….” (424). After the draft roll call, they lashed out: rioters lynched some eighteen blacks, killed scores more, and set loose a period of lawlessness that ended only when federal troops arrived from Gettysburg (244). When, some four months after the riots, President Lincoln declared from the Gettysburg battlefield that the nation “shall have a new birth of freedom…” he implicitly signaled the eclipse of the reform campaigns initiated by Leggett and his ilk (“Address at Gettysburg” 267). A new narrative would be necessary to inspire the transformation of American society.

The volunteers from Concord, Massachusetts, marched off to war on April 19, 1861. Their departure came seven days after Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter, and eighty-six years to the day after the clash between British troops and colonists at the Old North Bridge. The doubled significance of that date did not escape Nathaniel Hawthorne. Reflecting upon the historical parallels between the onset of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars in New England, and armed with a legend of a young man’s striving for immortality—a legend told to him by Henry David Thoreau—Hawthorne set out to mould these materials into a new romance (Davidson 5-6).

Septimius Felton; or, the Elixir of Life (1872) embodies Hawthorne’s conviction that the traditions of the literary romance and of social reform inspired by Revolutionary history were coming to a close. The text, on which Hawthorne worked from 1861 to 1863, remained
uncompleted upon his death in May 1864; two drafts were discovered among his papers along with several other aborted works. 2 Hawthorne’s manuscript reflects the anxiety of an author seemingly incapable of bringing his tale to completion. The posthumously published text bears the marks of Hawthorne’s ambivalence: halfway through the narrative a key character is transformed from a love interest into the protagonist’s half-sister; “several pages” of the story have disappeared or been destroyed; and the text is punctuated with bracketed passages in which Hawthorne dictates his intentions for narrative development or description—plans that were never brought to fruition.

The optimism implicit in Hawthorne’s early efforts in aid of reform—his sojourn at Brook Farm and his frequent contributions to the Democratic Review—is absent from his later fiction. 3 The Blithedale Romance (1852), his tale of the rise and fall of a utopian community, is burdened by skepticism; behind the mask of his scoffing narrator, Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne narrates the impossibility of reform in the face of human weakness and selfishness. In Septimius Felton, the protagonist and namesake of the romance translates these same concerns into a quest for immortality. Taking the clash between colonists and British troops at Concord as the backdrop for his romance, Hawthorne crafts a scenario in which his protagonist encounters his double: a British soldier whom Septimius kills in a bizarre duel on the fringe of the battle, and on whose person the American finds a mysterious text that aids his experiments to concoct an elixir of everlasting life. Creating such a potion, Septimius believes, will enable him to bring about a significant transformation of society. By the end of the romance, however, all of his hopes prove to be mere pipe dreams.

Sin, Septimius asserts, has doomed man to a brief and futile life; “‘the fall of man, which Scripture tells us of, seems to me to have its operation in this grievous shortening of
earthly existence, so that our life here is all grown ridiculous,’” he laments (17). Most centrally, death erases any hope for human progress: “‘What mortal work has ever been done since the world began!’” he cries. “Because we have no time. No lesson is taught. We are snatched away from our study before we have learned the alphabet. As the world now exists, I confess it to you frankly…it seems to me all a failure, because we do not live long enough” (17). His crippling fear of mortality drives the young man’s desperate study for an antidote to death. Septimius’s hopes receive a spark when he recovers the ciphered notebook from the body of the British soldier.

As Septimius puzzles out the meaning of the text and comes closer—or so he believes—to realizing his hope for immortality, he daydreams about the great good he will be able to accomplish. Finding an accomplice in the ethereal Sibyl Dacy—whom Septimius ultimately discovers is the vengeful betrothed of his British victim—he envisions the pair devoting subsequent centuries to alternately amusing and productive ends. “‘In our reign of a hundred years,’” he muses, “‘we shall have time to extinguish errors, and make the world see the absurdity of them; to substitute other methods of government for the old, bad ones; to fit the people to govern itself, to do with little government, to do with none…’” (195).

Septimius careens from despair to audacious hope, and his prognostication for the future of American government reveals the fatal optimism behind his quest for immortality.

In that Septimius’s hopes for democratic reform—that the people could be free to govern themselves with little encroachment upon their freedom by the federal government—echo those of Jacksonian partisans, the failure of Hawthorne’s fictional hero to achieve his goal suggests that the author also deemed the democratic promise of the Jacksonian period a failure. Hawthorne himself had been won over by Jackson’s populist appeal; during the
General’s 1833 tour to the northeast, Hawthorne wandered to the outskirts of Salem to meet the then-President (Widmer 7). Septimius’s vision for the disappearance of government paraphrases the motto of the pro-Jackson Democratic Review, “The best government is that which governs least.” That motto, too, provided a utopian message; as political thinkers including Thomas Paine had predicted, government would remain a necessity for as long as man suffered from such fatal flaws of character. Hawthorne would not indulge any hope for man’s perfectibility in the face of the corruption of the Review’s democratic cause as a result of hubris and exceptionalism. Prior to the late 1840s, at a time when Hawthorne remained among its key contributors, the Review—and the Young America movement for which the journal became an official organ—had been a largely intellectual and literary endeavor, attracting the interest or services of such figures as Evert Duyckinck and, more peripherally, Melville. As the chorus for war with Mexico reached its crescendo, however, a new generation took control of the movement; brash young men co-opted calls for literary nationalism in service of waving the banner of Manifest Destiny. Both inside and outside the movement an awareness set in—and was articulated by Melville, Douglass, and, later, Lippard, among others—that the war meant subordinating the interests of mechanic-soldiers to those of slave holders, that slavery rather than class would be the dominant issue in the political realm, and that elites were content to pay mere lip service to republican principles. The linear history that Lippard traced between Bunker Hill and Tenochtitlan also led inexorably on to civil war.

Hawthorne’s romance offers few moments of direct commentary upon its historical setting or the political context within which its author struggled to conclude the narrative; rather, Septimius’s efforts to comprehend his family history and his own place in the world
resonate with the crises of a culture confronted with war and the dissolution of its seemingly divinely-protected corporate body. Just as the first clash at Bull Run put the lie to lingering notions of the nation’s unique destiny, so does Septimius’s failure to concoct the elixir of life shatter any suggestion that immortality should be his lot. Indeed, prior to that failure Septimius proves willing to place himself at the very center of the historical events unfolding as he takes up his quest:

It seemed to Septimius, in his enthusiastic egotism, as if the whole chain of events had been arranged purposely for this end; a difference had come between two kindred peoples; a war had broken out; a young officer, with the traditions of an old family represented in his line, had marched, and had met with a peaceful student, who had been incited from high and noble motives to take his life; and then came a strange, brief intimacy, in which his victim made the slayer his heir. All these chances, as they seemed, all these interferences of Providence, as they doubtless were, had been necessary in order to put this manuscript into the hands of Septimius ….

(61)

As Septimius gives in to hubris and devotes more and more of his life to his experiment, his story takes on increasingly gothic tones. In tracing the lineage of the potion described in the manuscript, Septimius delves into the dark history of his mixed Puritan and Native American lineage and encounters the ghostly narratives of ancient British nobles and American Indian sachems. These narratives reveal lessons regarding the crippling effects of selfishness and an obsession with history to which Septimius pays little heed.

The egotism evident in the passage quoted above is but one manifestation of Septimius’s slide into a self-centered worldview and an indifference toward others that Hawthorne fashioned elsewhere in his fiction as the “Unpardonable Sin” of humanity. Septimius remains unmoved upon encountering such sinfulness among his forebears, particularly in the person of a wizard whose own quest for the elixir of life purportedly required that he spill the blood of a loved one. After recounting the wizard’s story, Sibyl
questions the veracity of the legend; of the wizard’s willingness to make a literal human sacrifice to his mission, Sibyl retorts, “But this I reject, as too coarse an idea; and, indeed, I think it may be taken to mean symbolically, that the person who desires to engross himself more than his share of human life must do it by sacrificing to his selfishness some dearest interest of another person, who has a good right to life, and may be as useful in it as he” (112). Though the tale serves as a thinly veiled warning to Septimius, he continues on his course, and his abstracted quest for the secret of eternal life causes him to shun the outside world and cut him off from his childhood friends, Rose (his love-interest-turned-half-sibling) and Robert Hagburn (the humble yeoman who becomes a Revolutionary hero and Rose’s husband).

Moreover, in giving himself up to the supposed wisdom contained in the ciphered notebook, Septimius embraces self-interest while disavowing a republican spirit. The philosophy articulated in that text constitutes “a truth that does not make men better, though perhaps calmer; and beneath which the buds of happiness curl up like tender leaves in a frost” (122). The cold logic of the text manifests itself in aphorisms such as “‘Do not any foolish good act; it may change thy wise habits’”; “‘If thou seest human poverty, or suffering, and it trouble thee, strive moderately to relieve it, seeing that thus thy mood will be changed to a pleasant self-laudation’”; and “‘Read not great poets; they stir up thy heart; and the human heart is a soil which, if deeply stirred, is apt to give out noxious vapors’” (125-26). Such aphorisms (only slightly exaggerated versions of Franklin’s maxims?) articulated the guiding principles of antebellum capitalist society, a society that preferred “wisdom,” acquisitiveness, and self-congratulation to an honest appreciation of charity and art, and which was steadily being drained of its vitality and moral force. “What was the matter with
this document,” the narrative voice demands, “that the young man’s youth perished out of him as he read?” (122).

Another chief impediment to progress comes from the reverence for the past that plagues Septimius’s line. His lineage comprises

a sort of history that is quite as liable to be mythical, in its early and distant stages, as that of Rome, and, indeed, seldom goes three or four generations back without getting into a mist really impenetrable, though great, gloomy, and magnificent shapes of men often seem to loom in it, who, if they could be brought close to the naked eye, would turn out as commonplace as the descendents who wonder at and admire them. (159-60)

History, Hawthorne asserts, clouds one’s judgment, makes great men out of humbugs, and enshrines the accomplishments of the past at the expense of progress in the present. Though Hawthorne introduces this burden in terms of the affliction of the Puritan and Native American past upon a member the Revolutionary generation, his decision to return to the Revolution—to turn some three generations back—invites readers to consider the weight of Revolutionary history on the generation that saw the collapse of its hopes for transforming society and which was now suffering through civil war.

A suggestive passage from the romance, in which Hawthorne recounts the story of a seemingly immortal sachem, echoes the paralyzing effects that the Revolutionary fathers had upon their inheritors. The sachem, who had outlived generations of his tribesmen, “was a wise and good man, and could foretell as far into the future as he could remember into the past; and he continued to live on, till his people were afraid that he would live forever, and so disturb the whole order of nature…. ” (100). Only by slaying the ageless man did the tribe believe that they could regain control over their own destiny. In a bracketed passage immediately following the history of the sachem, Hawthorne declared his intention in revising the text to
[m]ake this legend grotesque, and express the weariness of the tribe at the intolerable control the undying one had of them; his always bringing up precepts from his own experience, never consenting to anything new, and so impending progress; his habits hardening into him, his ascribing to himself all wisdom, and depriving everybody of his right to successive command; his endless talk, and dwelling on the past, so the world could not bear him. Describe his ascetic and severe habits, his rigid calmness, etc. (101-2)

Given the straits into which they had led the nation, Hawthorne apparently concluded that the world could no longer bear the American founders.

Hawthorne’s inability, despite his committed efforts, to complete one final romance may have emerged from his fear that the audience for the form had disappeared. In his preface to The Marble Faun (1860), published after eight years of silence, he asked of the “Gentle, Kind, Benevolent, Indulgent, and most Beloved and Honoured Reader” whom he had addressed in previous prefaces, “is he extant now?” (2). “The Gentle Reader,” Hawthorne wrote, “in the case of any individual author, is apt to be extremely short-lived; he seldom outlasts a literary fashion” (2). To Hawthorne’s mind, the audience for the romance in general—and particularly for romances set during the Revolution—had dissipated; and, indeed, the number of romances set during the Revolution fell off considerably following their zenith of popularity during the 1830s and 1840s. “If I find him at all,” Hawthorne concluded of his “Gentle Reader,” “it will probably be under some mossy grave-stone, inscribed with a half-obliterated name, which I shall never recognize” (2).

The doom of the romance as an American literary form, Hawthorne foretold in this preface, stemmed from a lack of properly aged cultural materials: “It will be very long, I trust, before romance-writers may find congenial and easily handled themes either in the annals of our stalwart Republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual
lives. Romance and poetry, like ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers, need Ruin to make them grow” (3). That sense of historical and artistic distance was necessary for “evolving a thoughtful moral”—the central purpose of the romance (3). By setting his unfinished romance against the backdrop of the first clash of the Revolution, Hawthorne seemed to be setting himself up for failure.

Rather than provide a haze to disguise the author’s imaginative manipulations, the Revolutionary germ of Hawthorne’s tale spoke all too plainly to the present. The age of the Revolution, Hawthorne’s narrator contends, “was a good time, everybody felt, to be alive, [affording] a nearer kindred, a closer sympathy between man and man; a sense of the goodness of the world, of the sacredness of country, of the excellence of life….“ (23). “We know something of that time now,” he continues; “we that have seen the muster of the village soldiery on the meeting-house green…[and] seen the familiar faces that we hardly knew, now that we felt them to be heroes….“ (23). In both instances uncomplicated men of the order of Robert Hagburn experienced an elevation of purpose, and a sense of the “strange rapture” of the coming conflict (23). That sense of “rapture,” however, did not foretell an impending millennium. Rather, the opening shots of the war signaled the unveiling of both the best and worst in humanity: “O, high, heroic, tremulous juncture, when man felt himself almost an angel; on the verge of doing deeds that outwardly look so fiendish!” (23). Hawthorne was unable to reconcile himself to the idea that the war—or perhaps any war, or even any human action—could bring about a great reformation or rebirth. Thus, he wrote of the militia musters and calls to arms in Revolutionary Concord that they seemed of “slight account compared with any truth, any principle…..“ (23).
In preparing the scenario for his romance, Hawthorne composed a series of brief studies, in one of which he bluntly declared his intention to “Express strongly the idea that the shortness &c of life shows that human action is a humbug” (qtd. in Davidson 82). In accordance with that philosophy, Septimius disavows even that campaign that Americans would consider among the greatest of human actions. “‘Fools that men are!’” he proclaims, “‘they do not live long enough to know the value and purport of life, else they would combine together to live long, instead of throwing away the lives of thousands as they do. And what matters a little tyranny in so short a life? What matters a form of government for such ephemeral creatures?’” (22). In yet another study, Hawthorne scrawled that “Septimius thinks that he shall live to see the glory and the final event of the American Republic, which his contemporaries, perishing people, are fighting to establish” (qtd. in Davidson 88). More accurately, perhaps, Hawthorne believed himself to be witnessing the “final event” of that republic, the grim glory of the end of one campaign for freedom, with scant hope that the “new birth of freedom” proclaimed by Lincoln would ensue.
1 See Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Anti-Slavery & the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854*.

2 For more on the later period of Hawthorne’s career, see Edward Hutchinson Davidson, *Hawthorne’s Last Phase*. One of the two drafts of *Septimus Felton* was serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* from January through August of 1872 and subsequently published in book form (Davidson 76).

3 For Hawthorne’s contributions to the *Democratic Review*, see Widmer, *Young America*. 
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