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# Reexamining Virtue in *Arthur Mervyn*

*Clarissa McIntire*

Charles Brockden Brown wrote that the intent of his novel, *Arthur Mervyn*, was to inspire sympathy for others. Brown claimed that his portrayal of the enslaved, the poor, and the diseased would motivate readers to aid those in need, since he reasoned that “men only require to be made acquainted with distress for their compassion and their charity to be awakened” (3). His treatment of women, though, calls into question the novel’s purpose of inspiring universal compassion. His sole use of masculine pronouns in his introduction (“men,” “he”) alone could indicate his possible sexism. More conspicuously, Brown’s treatment of women illustrates what Bernard and Shapiro have called “the dominated status of women,” due to the “repeated linkage of seduction and exploitation” in the cases of Clemenza Lodi and Watson’s and Arthur’s sisters (qtd. in Brown 69). Nearly every woman Arthur comes in contact with experiences abuse to some degree (although not by Arthur himself); even Thetford’s wife, a fairly minor character, makes a brief appearance in which she yields to her husband’s manipulation (31). The unusual and surprising coupling of a novel about compassion with subplots of the seduction and

ruin of women appears to subvert the novel's intent and limit to one gender the sympathy Brown advocated for all.

Critics have extensively analyzed the role of charity in *Arthur Mervyn*, though never in conjunction with the novel's treatment of women. Most term Brown's work a purely "humanitarian novel," since it "describes particular suffering and offers a model for precise action," as Dietmar Schloss defines it (178). The "model" *Arthur Mervyn* offers is Arthur's own behavior as he encounters each type of sufferer and forms a plan for how to help them, such as his sudden impulse to volunteer at the local hospital (135). These sudden desires to help the less fortunate occur whenever Arthur sees anyone in need, as seen in his response to Susan's distress, Wallace's illness, or the discovery of what was possibly an Underground Railroad hideout, showing that Arthur does not discriminate against sex or race in his attempts to give relief. On the other hand, *Arthur Mervyn* follows all the "typical plot points of seduction-and-ruin narratives" that were established in the British novel *Clarissa*, according to Bernard and Shapiro (qtd. in Brown 69). The conventions *Clarissa* provided, based on British culture (from which American culture was derived, and was still very similar to), dictated that women "seem sexually cold" and "maintain an attitude of indifference or even of aversion" (Brophy 107). Further, British and American culture condemned any women who gave in to seduction, making those women outcasts. By narrating this process of seduction to rejection to ruin, the first volume of *Arthur Mervyn* seems to align itself with these cultural beliefs and condone poor treatment of seduced or fallen women.

However, I would like to suggest that by presenting a seduction narrative in a humanitarian novel, Brown finds a way to logically disprove the idea that a woman's worth should be based on her sexual purity, as it was in the culture of the time. Placing the situations of promiscuous women and those infected with yellow fever side by side draws a parallel between society's speedy judgment and intense dislike of both, even though the infected, and possibly the women, had fallen from social graces through no fault of their own. By drawing these parallels, sexual virtue becomes defined as an unreliable standard—since it can be taken from someone against their will—rather than a touchstone of morality. The way Brown folds his critique of society's treatment of fallen women into an unreliably narrated coming-of-age story, when considered alongside the restrictions both social and literary convention placed on women in the late 18th century, underscores the irrational nature of a society that judges based on the criterion of sexual virtue. By exposing how chastity can be easily imitated

or forcibly taken away, morality becomes associated with personal choice rather than a status of chastity. Other more trustworthy aspects of a person become more important when judging character, such as their civic, not sexual, virtue.

By portraying those infected with yellow fever alongside seduced women, Brown draws a parallel between the two categories of people and reveals a surprising number of similarities between the two situations. Arthur's excursions into the city include several episodes during which he sees the bodies of diseased individuals—some of “whose heart[s] still quivered”—roughly transported from the city to graveyards (133). The fear of the yellow fever consumes the public to the point that people were buried alive in the hopes of reducing any transmission of the disease. Those untouched by the disease treat the infected as lost causes without any hope—infection equated with death in the public mind. Similarly, unchaste women also experience total rejection from society. After being seduced by Colvill, Arthur's sister kills herself to escape “the upbraidings of her parents” and “the contumelies of the world” (143). The popular and contemporary seduction novel *The Coquette* likewise portrays the condemnation, “censure and reproach” experienced by women who had sex before or outside of marriage, whether they were willing or forced (Foster 899). Just as if they had been infected with a disease, they are uniformly scorned and no longer welcomed in respectable society. Family and friends repulse them with the same fearful, senseless rejection to which victims of yellow fever were subjected. Seen as impure, contaminated with either a physical illness or a socially unacceptable exploit, fever victims and seduced women face a miserable and probably very short future (members of both groups quickly succumb to death in *Arthur Mervyn*).

Then again, one notable exception to the death toll of the yellow fever, if extended to apply to the rejection of the unchaste, emphasizes the need to reassess society's treatment of seduced women. The only character readers meet in the first part of *Arthur Mervyn* who is able to contract and recover from yellow fever is Arthur himself, and he only succeeds in recovering due to the treatment he receives from Dr. Stevens. At great personal risk, Dr. Stevens takes Arthur into the former's own home and cares for him, despite the “fervent” and “well-meant” advice he receives against it from his neighbors (Brown 7). He believes there is hope for Arthur's recuperation, and Arthur does regain his health. This formula of kindness resulting in recovery frames Arthur's narrative, allowing him to live to tell his story and the stories of Clemenza, Watson's sister, and Arthur's sister. Arthur's acceptance into Dr. Stevens' home and subsequent

recovery, contrasted with the rejection and ruin of the women in the seduction subplots, allows us to question why acceptance was offered to one type of social outcast but not the other. If extended to apply to the treatment of women, Stevens' formula of compassion would save women from ruin as successfully as it did Arthur from death. For example, even when Arthur discovers that Welbeck seduced Clemenza, rather than rejecting her as society would, Arthur feels even more concern and compassion for her. Further, in the second part of *Arthur Mervyn*, Arthur even goes so far as to seek Clemenza out at a brothel, eventually rescuing her from the life of a prostitute. Unfortunately, just as Stevens' neighbors consider his mercy for Arthur to be dangerous, Brown's contemporary society considered the idea of offering mercy to unchaste women unwise and hazardous.

To challenge that common belief, Brown plainly linked his novel with the contemporary debate on the treatment of yellow fever by giving his fictional doctor the same name as a real and prominent doctor, Dr. Edward Stevens. Doing so underscores the similarity between the yellow fever treatment debate and the question Brown raises of how to treat seduced women, inviting readers to reconsider the logic of punishing seduced women with rejection rather than showing them mercy. Due to the rising number of cases of yellow fever in 1793, doctors argued extensively about the best ways to treat it, but they were unable to agree. One prominent doctor, Benjamin Rush, advocated for treating yellow fever harshly with "heroic bleedings"; on the other hand, Dr. Edward Stevens focused on "strengthening the body," which later proved a much more effective method (Schloss 178). Rush's and Stevens' methods parallel approaches to treating unchaste women at the time. The counterpart of Edward Stevens' gentle method of fever treatment is the fictional Dr. Stevens' mercy, while that of Rush's is society's condemnation. While Rush tried to help people regain health and American society tried to help people retain righteousness, their good intentions exhibited only "myopic, self-righteous humanitarianism that debilitates more than cures" (Schloss 178). On the other hand, the methods of the two Stevens resulted in successful recovery. Strengthening victims of yellow fever caused them to heal; taking in a sick man and caring for him personally and kindly, as the fictional Dr. Stevens did, resulted in recovery; therefore, forgiving and helping unchaste women can result in their reintegration into society and, ultimately, their redemption.

Reading *Arthur Mervyn* as an argument in favor of the redemption of ruined women could be problematic for many readers due to the submissiveness of the

female characters in the novel. Brown portrays not only the seduced women as weak and passive, but also Eliza and Susan (who aren't seduced), so that all the women are "unable to consult and to act for [themselves] on the most trivial occasion" (Brown 153). Susan either cannot or will not go to the city to find out the fate of her fiancé, Wallace, so Arthur goes for her; Clemenza subsists at Welbeck's mercy, and is unable to reclaim her fortune from him. Women in *Arthur Mervyn* are passive, never active, and it seems that men both create and solve their problems. The female characters are stationary while the males move about, either seducing women or saving them, and women exist only to "provide a crucial test of maturity and manhood" (Person 36). Brown's female characters behave only passively and incompetently, never assertively. Brown appears to be overlooking women as far as humanitarianism and compassion go since he chooses to put his characters under the same restrictions and imbue them with the same submissiveness expected of women in his day. Brown's readership, from his contemporaries to the present, could easily mistake the traditionally subservient roles of his female characters as supportive of society's conventionally demeaning treatment of women.

However, not only was his novel a reflection of the reality of the time, but on top of that, Brown uses the adolescent Arthur's unreliable narration to indirectly advocate for the rights of women by reflecting on Arthur's continuing attempts to figure out his own masculine identity in an unusual coming-of-age story. Responding to Susan's distress, Arthur spontaneously decides to return to the city to find Wallace and leaves without telling anyone, thinking his journey a "heroic sacrifice" (Brown 104). The possibility exists, though, that Arthur only interprets Susan's anxiety as inert when that wasn't actually the case. Arthur may leave out some information in his narrative, choosing to read Susan as immobile with anxiety because in giving her an identity of incapability, he simultaneously gives himself a capable one. In order to view himself as strong and authoritative, Arthur has to describe Susan as weak and helpless. Similarly, Arthur never even considers the fact that Clemenza could recover her fortune from Welbeck herself (154-155). This unreliability, which Patrick Brancaccio recognized, "lies not in the literal truth of Arthur's report of outward events, but in Arthur's interpretation of them" through the "interplay between [his] conscious and unconscious" (20). Arthur doesn't deliberately label Susan or Clemenza or any of the other women as incompetent in his narrative. Rather, he describes them as such in order to create a distinction between himself and women in general; he defines his own identity against the identity he creates for

the opposite gender. Descriptions of women, therefore, filter through Arthur's perception of reality and then surface in his narrative, resulting in the presentation of women as inactive and inept.

In addition to Arthur's unreliable narration, the seduction subplots' use of contemporary conventions of narrative writing makes *Arthur Mervyn* more successful in advocating for the rights of women than if those subplots had been omitted, which explains the novel's apparent degradation of women. On several occasions, Arthur takes the opportunity to imbue his story with a moral, such as when he claims that "to feel extraordinary indignation at vice, merely because we have partaken an extraordinary degree, of its mischiefs, is unjustifiable" (Brown 144). Arthur is permitted to pass judgment on the moral correctness of the events of the story. Pronouncing morals and lecturing with such boldness and authority occurs rarely in seduction novels of the time, though, because women narrated most of them, and such pronouncements and lecturing was considered unfeminine. Female characters dominate the authorship of letters in the epistolary novels *Clarissa* and *The Coquette*, and few of those novels' narrators proclaim moral correctness as confidently as Arthur does. The conventions of writing from the perspective of female narrators prevented them from pronouncing morals, since "female narration . . . [was] characterized by the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative witness," keeping them from participating in the "active shaping of narrative form and meaning" (Case 4, emphasis in original). According to these standards, had a woman narrated Arthur Mervyn, no direct or indirect condemnation of society's behavior towards seduced women could have been included in the text, since it would not have been prudently feminine for a woman to suggest such a thing.

Female authors of the time were painfully aware of the restrictions placed upon both them and their writing. Susanna Rowson, author of *Charlotte Temple* (another of the "canonical representations of seduction novels by women"), taught at the Young Ladies Academy in Boston, at which women were not allowed to speak in their graduation ceremony. In a speech by one of Rowson's female students, which had to be read at the ceremony by a man, the student declared, "We are called upon to use our influence to the honour of God and the well-being of society, we are responsible for . . . our acknowledged power" (Jarenski 60). Contemporary society limited the influence of that student, as well as the influence of all women, to almost nothing more than existing, since the only way this student could use her "acknowledged power" was to have a man exercise it for her. Richardson's *Clarissa* and Defoe's *Moll Flanders* are both

written by men but narrated by women, making it unacceptable for their narrators to preach about morals in any way. On the other hand, *Arthur Mervyn* is unique because it is both narrated and authored by men while addressing society's treatment of unfaithful women. It is this masculine presentation of the plight of women that makes it most successful at subverting common perceptions of women at the time. Because it occurred so rarely, the combination of a male author and a male narrator together highlighting the severity of woman's situation evidenced the gravity of the issue and encouraged society to more seriously consider it.

Although it seems that Brown endorses the unjust treatment of women by portraying the seduction and consequent ruin of three women, his inclusion of seduction plots actually strengthens the case against punishing women for unchaste behavior. The account of Clemenza Lodi particularly illustrates the illogicality of condemning women for loss of sexual virtue since that virtue can be taken from a woman against her will—it is a fallible standard of judgment. Clemenza speaks no English and relies on Welbeck to act as a translator, so when he begins to force himself on her, she doesn't have the ability to go to anyone for help. She relies on him so much, being "protectorless and indigent," that she remains entirely in his power (Brown 75). Welbeck gives her no other alternative than to give in to his persistent solicitations. Richardson's *Clarissa* similarly depicts the powerlessness women could experience when seduced, but contemporary readers criticized Clarissa, avowing that she "should have loved [and married] her rapist" (Lee 34). No one spoke out to praise her for trying so determinedly to avoid having sex with Lovelace. This popular reading has perplexed critics, inspiring in-depth analyses like *The Clarissa Project* (Stuber and Doody) in order to reconcile the reception of *Clarissa* with Richardson's instructive intent. Tom Keymer defines this intent as "a heightened awareness not only of the dangers represented in Lovelace but also of his own susceptibility to them" (qtd. Lee 37). The public's reception of *Clarissa* set a precedent for the interpretations of subsequent seduction novels, including *The Coquette* and *Charlotte Temple*, even though the first widely successful seduction novel intended to incriminate not the seduced woman but the libertine. The practice of reading the manipulated woman as the guilty party in a seduction confuses critics because they expect audiences to favor an alternative reading, considering women like Clemenza and Clarissa to be victims of the manipulations of scheming men. Such a reading argues that it is impossible to pass judgment

on the adulterous women of seduction novels since societal conventions and scheming men are the perpetrators of the seduction.

Therefore, because sexual purity isn't a reliable method of judging one's character, Brown advocates for a radical social change in which judgment of character and worth is based on civic virtue, sacrifice, and charity rather than abstinence and chastity. Had society based their judgment of Watson's sister on her "purest of human hearts" rather than the fact that she yielded to Welbeck, she and the other persecuted female characters would have had the opportunity to recover their reputations and reenter respectable society (Brown 68). The same mercy that Dr. Stevens extended to Arthur could have reclaimed Watson's and Arthur's sisters from ignominious deaths had judgment been based on their character and not their circumstances. Clemenza's eventual deliverance from the brothel also shows the power that mercy can have on the life of seduced women when Arthur treats her like a human being rather than one carrying a contagion of sexual corruption. Brown understood that, contrary to the common thought of the time, one's character cannot be understood when based on one's sexual purity. While society didn't distinguish between the two concepts, Brown's "conception of virtue . . . was infinitely more complicated" (Schloss 171). He understood that virtue includes not just chastity but qualities such as integrity, charity, and ethics. *Arthur Mervyn* shows that focusing wholly on only one aspect of virtue leads to faulty judgments and ruined lives, while judging women (or men) by their civic virtue and integrity of character leads to a much more sound and reliable understanding of the individual.

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