RICE UNIVERSITY

Novel Economies:
A Literary Pre-History of U.S. Commercial Capitalism, 1730-1859

By

Karen M. Rosenthal

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

Caroline Levander, Director
Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Digital Education,
Carlson Professor in the Humanities, and Professor of English

Nicole Waligora-Davis
Associate Professor of English

James D. Faubion
Radoslav Tsanoff Chair in Civic Affairs and Professor of Anthropology

Houston, TX
April 2017
ABSTRACT

Novel Economies:
A Literary Pre-History of U.S. Commercial Capitalism, 1730-1859

by

Karen M. Rosenthal

“Novel Economies” demonstrates that American literature played a fundamental role in enabling large-scale economic change in the United States, namely it helped acclimate and introduce the reading public to the virtues of commercial exchange and industrial production. Although current scholarship on early American literature assumes that literature either reacts to or chronicles the public’s understanding of the shifting terms of economic progress in the young nation, “Novel Economies” argues that literature enabled the U.S.’s turn towards commercial capitalism by adapting the productive practices associated with republican virtue. American authors redefined the labor practices that were supposed to ensure national strength and stability. With an archive that ranges from Benjamin Franklin’s economic treatises and belle lettres to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s public addresses and popular writings, “Novel Economies” highlights literature’s role in constructing a direct link between profitability, productivity, and virtue in the minds of American readers.

“Novel Economies” explores a variety of literary genres and texts to illustrate the ways American authors engaged with and challenged the values of economic republicanism. By beginning with texts of the early Republic, such as Franklin’s Autobiography and Stephen Burroughs’ Memoirs, this project illuminates the ways that the terms of American republicanism underwrite literary presentations of citizenship,
productive labor, and the individual’s relationship to public and private institutions. The impact of literature’s engagement with the ideals of republicanism is manifested in Martha Meredith Read’s and Sarah Savage’s seduction and sentimental fiction and James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romances; genres that transform in order to adapt republican values and definitions of virtue to fit the United States’ changing socioeconomic and political climates. Finally, “Novel Economies” turns to the United States on the brink of disunion with Emerson’s public speeches and Nathaniel Beverly Tucker’s secessionist fiction, illustrating the ways economic republican values served as a rhetorical touchstone for the political arguments made by both abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates. When the logics of economic republicanism are highlighted as supporting both small-scale agrarianism and commercial capitalism, then literature’s investment in promulgating and adapting these ideals exposes narrative as a key catalyst to U.S. economic change.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this dissertation is the product of individual hard work, it ultimately would not and could not exist without its (and my) indefatigable community of advisors, colleagues, friends, and family who pushed me to achieve it. Working with Caroline Levander was the reason I chose to attend Rice University, and her guidance and willingness to continually ask me tough questions and to push me to find answers has made this project what it is. I will always be thankful to Nicole Waligora-Davis for her nuanced readings and poignant advice that encouraged me to find my own voice in this project. Furthermore, I would like to thank James Faubion for his kindness, ability to provide clarity from an outside perspective, and enthusiastic reading of many drafts. This project has gone through many iterations and revisions, and these three individuals have helped me to shift through the lumps of coal to find its diamonds.

Beyond these advisors, I have received incredible feedback and advice on this project from colleagues within and outside of Rice University. A special thank you to Melissa Gniadek who encouraged me throughout this dissertation project; your special brand of enthusiasm and discerning eye makes me glad to call you a colleague and your compassion makes me glad to call you a friend. Much gratitude goes to AnaMaria Seglie, Abby Goode, Rachel Conrad, and Joe Carson for their insight, advice, and questions that helped me to shape this project. I am indebted to Helena Michie, who has served as a source of academic moral support throughout my time at Rice, and to Terry Doody, who was always willing to read through a draft or listen when I needed advice. Moreover, to James Finley, Erin Hendel, and Marlowe Daly-Galeano, my partners in goal setting and draft sharing, thank you for helping get this project off the ground and for ensuring that I
kept moving when things got tough. Finally, I am supremely appreciative of the editorial advice I received from Sandra Gustafson and reviewers at *J19* and *Early American Literature*; their feedback on the first chapter of this project provided direction and structure to the entire dissertation in countless ways.

I would like to thank Rice University’s Department of English for funding me as I pursued my graduate degree. Additionally, many thanks go to Rice’s Department of English and Program in Writing and Communication for providing me with opportunities to teach and think more about the processes of reading, writing, and critical thinking. I am also grateful to Rice’s Humanities Research Center and Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for offering me opportunities to learn more about the workings of the university and for helping me to build a new set of skills. Lauren Kleinschmidt, Melissa Bailar, Jennifer Shade Wilson, Elizabeth Festa, Kyung-Hee Bae, Phyllis McBride, and Kiri Kilpatrick provided invaluable perspective along the way.

To my many friends at Rice, in Houston, and beyond this has been a journey that has taught me how to ask for help, and I am thankful to so many of you who have always been there when I called. My inexpressible gratitude to my Mom, Larry, and Mike, who maybe never quite understood what I was up to but who always understood that I needed support. To my writing companion of the last three years, J.J. Thomson, thank you for sleeping on my feet when they were cold and for reminding me of the importance of taking breaks for belly rubs. And finally, Brian, you’re the best teammate I could have ever hoped for; we were on opposite sides of campus at Rice, and I’m so glad the gym was in the middle.
Table of Contents

Abstract i

Acknowledgements iii

Introduction: Narratives of Virtue: American Economic Republicanism 1

Chapter 1: A Generative Populace: Benjamin Franklin’s Economic Agendas 27

Chapter 2: The Republican Citizen and the Republican Criminal: Stephen Burroughs’s “Sophisticated Wickedness” 67

Chapter 3: Classes of Sentiment: Martha Meredith Read and Sarah Savage’s Narrations of Female Labor 105

Chapter 4: Challenging the Value of Land: An Economic James Fenimore Cooper 142

Chapter 5: Reproducing Production Value: Emerson, Capitalism, and Slavery 178

Coda: A Narrative Interrupted: The South and American Economic Republicanism 225

Conclusion: 21st Century Novel Economies: Republican Resonances 234

Bibliography 241
INTRODUCTION

Narratives of Virtue: American Economic Republicanism

It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty… From whence, then, arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages which we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages we can propose to derive from it (Smith 60-61).

During the seventeenth century, the “idea of ‘making a living’” shifted the ways in which the Western world began to think about labor, money, and commodities. Although private wealth existed previous to the commodity trade, the idea of accumulating and aggressively seeking profit was not seen as a natural pursuit; instead, work was understood to be “an end in itself,” a traditional part of life (Heilbroner 17-20). The evolution of a monied class meant a new set of sociopolitical interests that “[were] countered by a renewed… assertion of the ideal of the citizen, virtuous in his devotion to the public good and his engagement in relations of equality and ruling-and-being-ruled” (Pocock 48). The passage above, an excerpt from Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), imagines the influence an “invisible hand” can have on the marketplace, an idea that Smith would later solidify and fully address in his An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776). In its more robustly articulated version, the metaphor of an “invisible hand” describes the ways an
individual’s economic actions can benefit a capitalist society; and, in this excerpt, Smith proposes that mankind forms social bonds or sentimental sympathies through emulation. Public perception of wealth and of success motivates desire for such trappings. An individual seeks to better his situation beyond basic subsistence and sustenance because he seeks to be “observed,” “attended to,” and “taken notice of” when in the company of his fellow man. Smith’s endorsement of capitalism’s social influence and presumption that human agents and human nature will help to motivate economic progress echoed prevailing sentiments at the time. Through linking these economic theories to the nebulously defined virtues of good citizenry, “Novel Economies” demonstrates the ways American literature melded the rhetoric of republicanism with changing economic forms and in so doing, endorsed the pursuit of capital as a valuable cultural standard.

“Novel Economies” contends that widespread economic change in the United States emerged out of literary celebrations of profit and generative labor as a republican value. By extending the premise that the ideals of republicanism were economic before they were political,¹ this project highlights American literature as instrumental in circulating those values and introducing the populace to the virtues of an expanding commodity market and industrial capitalism. In recent years, scholars have attended to literature’s participation in economic change, or as Meredith McGill explains, “[that] literature itself was caught up in the period’s formative struggles over economic development” (15). These connections are explored by critics who merge the aesthetics of the texts with the contemporaneous economic history (Hewitt 618-20); link the

¹ For a more comprehensive study of the history of republicanism and political see Wil Verhoeven’s Americomania, Joyce Appleby’s Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination, Gregory S. Alexander’s Commodity & Property: Competing Visions of Property in American Legal Thought, and Drew R. McCoy’s The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America.
evolution of abstract finance to narrative accounts of a collective imaginary (Baucom 16, 32); focus on the ways literature facilitates the public’s understanding of paper money and collective debt (Baker 2-3); and draw parallels between literary and financial rhetoric, especially in terms of contracted guarantees against loss (Wertheimer xiv). These studies offer critical insight into the evolution of mercantile and abstract economic forms in the United States; however, they also approach the U.S.’s adoption of large-scale commercialism and industrialism as a foregone conclusion. With the exception of Joyce Appleby, Gregory Alexander, and Wil Verhoeven, those who seek to understand the rhetorical confluences that draw American literary and economic production together have consistently suggested that the ideals of agrarian economics were fundamentally distinct from those of commercial exchange. In so doing, they have divided economic agendas from political rhetoric and discounted the ways the public participated in and challenged these changes.

An in-depth exploration of the literary influences that enabled the American populace to accept large-scale economic change provides new context for early American and U.S. economic development as well as contemporary valuations of productive labor. Once republicanism is understood as an economic philosophy that became political ideology, it explains the conflation of laissez-faire capitalism with democracy, the

---

2 Following in the footsteps of historians like Gregory Alexander and T.H. Breen, I distinguish between small-scale commercial production and large-scale industrial manufacturing. Although the Lowell Mills and other mass-production factories existed in the U.S. prior to the Civil War, I use the term commercial or commerce to signify economic exchange and trade that remained consistent with republican ideals, namely that endorsed the pursuit of productive labor but maintained a commitment to individualism and personal property-ownership.

3 For example, Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* contrasts “the imagery of industrialism and certain special attitudes towards visible nature” as a “universal” literary pattern that “identified… rural peace and simplicity” and “urban power and sophistication” (19). Such a staunch demarcation between the urban and rural, the industrial and natural denies that these two economic forms could be mutually enabling and also suggests that literature reinforces this binary., and “a viable civic literary culture in early America dissolved, and… an embattled tradition of civic authorship was institutionalized and privatized alongside the consolidation of economic man” (Rice 23).
commodification of democracy, and the idealistic shift celebrating consumption over production. And, once literature is understood as circulating the values of both economic and political republicanism, then it becomes responsible for disseminating the basic precepts driving American capitalism and the commodity market. At first glance, “Novel Economies”’ focus on agrarian and commercial economic ideals seems distantly removed from today’s global financial markets and diverse abstractions of value. Yet, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates over inflated land and real estate prices, the value hierarchies applied to types of labor and those performing the work (namely, women, minorities and immigrants), the role of corporations, and government regulation of changing economic forms are incredibly familiar to contemporary American citizens, especially in an election year. These parallels are why economists like Paul Krugman and Thomas Piketty turn to examples from the “Gilded Age” and the writings of Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen to explain current trends in global income inequality and why economic historians like A.W. Coates returns to J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur’s Letters to an American Farmer to underscore the role public perception of America’s incomparable economic potential has played in determining U.S. economic forms (9).

“Novel Economies” investigates the break between economic and political republicanism to examine the ways American literature involved the populace in large-scale economic changes and made their generative labor integral to widespread political and economic stability. This proposal of a shared agenda linking the virtues celebrated and challenged by early American literature and those thematized as intrinsic to the republican social good is not meant to imply a nefarious, collusive partnership between literary writers and political economists. Instead, these observations suggest the power of
public perception and that economics must be understood within the context of its cultural setting because economic structures and ideals are enabled by culture. There are numerous narratives that can be told about how the U.S. transitioned from an agrarian to a commercial and then industrial society, but instead of relying on business history or the evolution of industry to understand this progression, “Novel Economies” studies republicanism as an economic agenda, linking popular literary culture to valuations of population and labor. Economic republicanism quantified labor and valued productive work as contributions to the public good. The popular works of canonical authors, such as Benjamin Franklin, James Fenimore Cooper, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, reveal the ways literature established the parameters of economic republicanism through making virtue into a commodity and solidified its own value as a disseminator of virtue. By tracing the evolution of economic republicanism through distinct literary voices and genres, “Novel Economies” calls attention to the cultural forces enabling and changing U.S. capitalism. The following pages, therefore, ask how approaching American republicanism through economics reframes current understandings surrounding the relationship between literature and capitalism; how literary and political rhetoric’s focus on virtue converged to dictate economic norms that govern notions about labor and generative work; and how the economic focus behind republican population management brings to light literature’s catalytic role, empowering a commercial, capitalistic society.

***

To account for a range of reactions to republicanism’s indeterminacy, “Novel Economies” evaluates the term in its shifting context: public perception of economic potential. The modern republic was defined by its ability to manage the political,
economic, and public dynamism, or as Daniel Webster concretely details, it was characterized by “widely held property, [a] representative government that privileged deliberation, an educated citizenry, and Christianity” (Gustafson 46). Property-ownership, an educated and deliberative populace, and moral virtue: the attributes that scholars have identified as crucial to imagining the U.S as a political republic had all already achieved a privileged status in America’s collective ideals because of the polity’s agendas for economic growth. Land ownership was prized for engendering the owner’s investment in the nation but also drew attention to America’s potential as a producer and exporter of resources (Verhoeven 23-24); education and deliberation made for a knowledgeable voting public (Gustafson 37-39) but also an open-minded populace, adaptable to advances in economic production, technology, and entrepreneurship; and finally, religion and morality were valued for promulgating the ideal “that private ‘interests’ could and should be subordinated to the common welfare of the polity” (Alexander 29) and have been praised for fostering a uniquely American work ethic (Weber 9) and the relationships that made an exchange economy possible (Pocock 48-49). These economic undercurrents are just as fundamental to the ideals of the modern republic as their political overtones, but the economic emphases of republicanism necessarily required rhetorical dynamism, accommodating and adapting to new economic forms as the American colonies grew civilly, demographically, and financially into the United States.

Republican ideals needed to expand, making the tension between capitalistic accumulation—economic health—and the public good—sociopolitical health—both the value and the paradox of the American economy, and American literary and political
discourse became responsible for either challenging or resolving that paradox. As early as 1630, John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” sermon uses commercial exchange as a metaphor to exemplify the ways sentimental good will fosters social stability: “We must uphold a familiar commerce together. We must delight in each other; make other’s conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body” (10). Labor is upheld alongside shared emotional experiences for building the public good, and in so doing, Winthrop stresses to the settlers that sociopolitical and economic agendas are mutually enabling. This sense that an individual’s labor and pursuit of profit could and would benefit society at large continued to color American attitudes towards national economics; Samuel P. Newman, a lecturer at Bowdoin college, published his views on political economy in 1835, and the first two sentences of his text book read: “Men are seen in their most improved condition, when associated together in large communities. The excitements of competition are then most strongly felt—enterprise and exertion are called forth and liberally rewarded” (13). In contrast to Winthrop’s idealization of a cooperative society engaged in mutually beneficial economics, Newman reconfigures the value of community into an endorsement of capitalistic competition. Mankind is “seen” in “their most improved condition” when pushing one another towards “exertion” or “enterprise” thereby implying that social contests for economic “rewards” signal progress. Tracking the shift in the value of community and the virtues of economic competition from Winthrop to Newman underscores the role an increasingly diversified American economy played in shifting the terms of republicanism.
One of the central contentions of “Novel Economies” is that literature did not simply respond and record economic change; narrative catalyzed it. However, to make sense of American economic growth, literary scholars have long studied texts that appeared after moments of fiscal transition to understand the populace’s reaction to economic changes, oftentimes focusing on the ways in which narrative communicates fear or anxiety about the aforementioned financial and labor systems change. More recently, scholars have begun to approach the study of the rise of American capitalism as more than concomitant to the rise of the novel. Analyses turn to what Ian Baucom refers to as the “‘novelization’ of a collective imaginary” where “a complex mix of historicist method, actuarial science, and novelized critical imaginary … helped to permit the emergence of finance culture” (16, 41). Or, in the words of Mary Poovey, “writing helped make the system of credit and debt usable and the market model of value familiar as well” (2). Extending beyond these assessments, “Novel Economies” argues that literary and popular writings did more than to provoke the reading public’s imaginative ability and enable large swaths of the populace to think abstractly; instead, it asserts that the populace became invested in economic prosperity and change through literary celebrations of virtue and the virtues of generative production. In rewriting these timelines to highlight agrarianism as the foundation for American republican economics, “Novel Economies” is able to merge and track eighteenth- and nineteenth-conversations about the fiscal repercussions of slave labor, the known limits of land as a productive

---

4 Though scholars have begun to recognize that literary portrayals of economic change also reveal that the public understood abstract financial concepts in a positive light, analyses still tend to focus on affective, negative responses, see Howard Horwitz’s By The Laws of Nature and David Anthony’s Paper Money Men. Moreover, Jennifer J. Baker’s Securing the Commonwealth recognizes that literature played a significant role in revising how the public understood concepts that were supposed to make them fearful—debt, financial loss, and the commodity trade—but separates the commercial market from agrarianism, ostensibly excluding a majority of the populace from these “realizations” (2-3).
resource, and the problems of restricting an economy to one avenue of production. As one of the key sources of personal income as well as national export during the colonial, early republic, and antebellum periods, agrarianism emerges as a potent point of origin through which perceptions of American economic exceptionalism were crafted, revised, and narrated.

Political and literary praise for America’s economic experimentation tracks how rhetorical narrative helped construct a direct link between profitability, productivity, and virtue in the minds of America’s public. Where republican ideals promoted an “abundance of land [as the] colonists’ most important economic resource,” the economic growth it provided was limited (Matson 26); therefore, once independent, the values that praised land ownership for contributing to the public good had to contend with a new paradigm. James Madison’s essay number 10 in The Federalist Papers expressed concern that economic factions and personal economic interest might disrupt the republic:

But the most common and durable source of factions, has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold, and those who are without property, have ever formed distinct interests in society. … A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a monied interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern Legislation (44).

The Federalist Papers were written to persuade the public to ratify the Constitution and remain “the most authoritative interpretation” of it (Willis xi); therefore, not only were
these papers responsible for revising Americans’ perception of their existing government, they also sought to help define it for future citizens. Where economic republicanism promised that citizens’ investment in property-ownership and land would yield national financial growth and stability, these rosy ideals were never predicated upon the equal distribution of property. Even though society’s “distinct interests” complicated republican ideals, the “different sentiments and views” are necessary to and may even reflect progress towards the goal of “civilized nation.” Factions and partisan politics emerge out of individual economic pursuits and self-interest, and it is the government’s “principal task” to regulate—not restrict—these “various and interfering interests” and to ensure that they benefit the nation. Madison focuses on building a government that tacitly understands that agrarian and commercial capitalism are neither diametrically opposed nor incongruent, and despite the social factions that emerge out of a diverse economy, these “distinct” self-interests still foster investment in the wellbeing and growth of the public good.

Through tracing the shifts and changes in literature’s investment in republican rhetoric and agrarian and commercial agendas, “Novel Economies” reveals how distinctly intertwined political economy and collective imaginary were in early America. For example: Arthur Mervyn, the eponymous hero of one of Charles Brockden Brown’s novel (1799), turns to literature to illustrate the economic difference between agrarian and commercial republicanism: “My books had taught me the dignity and safety of the middle path, and my darling writer abounded with encomiums on rural life. At a distance from luxury and pomp I viewed them, perhaps, in a just light. A nearer scrutiny confirmed my early prepossessions, but at the distance at which I now stood, the lofty
edifices, the splendid furniture, and the copious accommodations of the rich, excited my admiration and my envy” (37). Mervyn’s books praise the “dignity” and “safety” in “the middle path” or “rural life,” but such descriptors indicate Mervyn’s disdain for the agrarian republican life. “The middle path” cannot compare to the “copious accommodations of the rich” thereby implying that owning land may promise independence and self-sufficiency but it will not produce the wealthy opulence that Mervyn experiences in Philadelphia. A series of chance encounters and improbable coincidences expand Mervyn’s knowledge of economic practices and professional achievement beyond what he read in his books, and contained within his disdain for the “prepossessions” literature taught him is his sense that he may have never experienced this life otherwise. *Arthur Mervyn* demonstrates the ways that literature championed and challenged republican ideals and expanded the reading public’s knowledge of the economic potential of commerce and its influence over sociopolitical relationships.

When the relationship between republican thought and American economic growth is highlighted, it enables scholars of nineteenth century literature to reconsider the relationship between the educational aims of literary discourse and productive labor. Henry David Thoreau presents literature as equally necessary to republican nation building as agrarianism: “[i]nstead of cultivating the earth for wheat and potatoes, [authors] cultivate literature, and fill a place in the Republic of Letters” (Thoreau 97). Where republican ideals celebrated agrarianism for fostering the populace’s investment in the nation, literature and writing were celebrated for their educational value. Early and antebellum American novels sought to prove their educational value: “virtually every American novel … [redefined] the genre tautologically as all those things it was
presumed not to be—moral, truthful, educational and so forth” (Davidson 40). Extending beyond literary authors’ desire to present their works as educational, critics like Sandra Gustafson see literature as educational because it fosters political “modes of reading that are attentive to the dynamics of deliberation,” which she asserts are necessary to ensuring that the populace of a democratic republic is actively engaged in fostering the public good (Gustafson 37-39). Books provide an education in republican virtue in this construction, and by equating that which generates production, profit, or people with virtue, republican literature redefines the value of property and commodity, instilling both with the potential to foster public wellbeing. Not only did imaginative writings revise republican ideals and share them with the actual laborers performing the agrarian and commercial work integral to U.S. political and economic stability, but these works also transformed literary works into commodities that can instruct in the methods of economic virtue. Ultimately, literature that explores labor, production, and profit as virtuous demonstrates how texts that take up the themes of republicanism are complicit in advancing U.S. commercialism.

“Novel Economies” demonstrates literature’s catalytic role in America’s *continuum* of economic experimentation by focusing on authors who either challenge or expand the ideals of economic republican virtue. It tracks economic republicanism’s influence upon American literary and political culture from the colonial era’s idealization of the political and profit potential of agrarianism through to the Civil War’s consolidation of the U.S.’s federal regulation of economics and the nation’s focus on large-scale industrialization. Because of its interest in the economic shift from

---

5 Many of the presumptions that literary critics and economic historians depend on when discussing the chronology of economic evolution in the United States derive from Alfred D. Chandler Jr.’s seminal text,
agrarianism to commercialism, “Novel Economies” focuses on texts and authors located in the mid-Atlantic to New England, regions where large-scale manufacturing and industrialization became the dominant mode of economic production. This project moves chronologically with each chapter examining a historical moment that signified a transition in political republican ideology—its shift from being a British to an American concept, its application post-independence, its pertinence as economic forms changed, and its consequence in a nation on the brink of division—and it foregrounds these discussions in distinct literary genres—the autobiography, sentimental fiction, historical romance, and public oratory—in order to explore their prescriptions for the public good.6 This approach highlights an essential correspondence between the rhetoric that fostered commercial capitalism and the cultural mores put forth by literature. The majority of eighteenth-century authors wrote novels because the genre was seen as a departure from “archaic” political, class-oriented agendas (Shapiro 11), and when those novels are read alongside economic theory, public editorials, and legal decisions, their collective treatment of the tropes and tenants of republicanism reveals that the rise of American commercial capitalism depended upon literary culture. From Benjamin Franklin’s popular writings, to Martha Meredith Read’s transatlantic epistolary novel, James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romances, and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s public orations,

---

6 The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business. Chandler’s project locates the start of “modern business enterprise” with the incorporation of the railroad industry after the Civil War (63-4). While Walter Benn Michaels (The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism) and Alan Trachtenberg (The Incorporation of America) emphasize the influence of postbellum economic change, such as the gold standard and incorporation, had on American literature, the timelines of their explorations further the misunderstanding that the antebellum United States’ economy was not influential in its later unification and industrialization.

6 This focus on the antebellum period of American literature also reflects a generic difference where, according to Mary Poovey’s Genres of the Credit Economy, “in the 1860s, some Literary writers tried to ban facts from novels, in a desperate attempt to raise the status of this form” (3). Thereby allowing for the reverse assertion: that prior to this point, literary writers incorporated fact into their works in order to raise the value of their works.
“Novel Economies” explores how literature’s adaptations to republican rhetoric gave rise to American commercialism.

Political republicanism in the United States can and has been critiqued for its duplicity: supposedly representing the voice of the populace but then limiting that voice to white, male landowners. Republicanism was seductive: it embodied America’s political ideals and its narrative was powerful enough to mask its marginalization of the majority of the populace (Mercieca 19-20). Margaret Fuller elucidates the hypocrisy and hope of America’s republican values when she writes: “though the free American so often feels himself free… only to pamper his appetites and his indolence through the misery of his fellow beings, still it is not in vain, that the verbal statement has been made, ‘All men are born free and equal.’ There it stands, a golden certainty wherewith to encourage the good, to shame the bad” (Fuller 236-37). For the most part, literary critics see “republican values [as transforming] the literary marketplace” by enabling those who were “legally and politically excluded from U.S. politics could express opinions on the shape of public culture through the novels they wrote as well as the ones they bought and borrowed” (McGill 14; Davidson 44). But to study texts of authors whose voices were excluded from the republican political spectrum and to assume that the publication and circulation of their generative labor served as an equitable counterbalance to those boundaries would be idealistic. “Novel Economies” seeks to include those whose writings present “opinions on the shape of public culture” and who, like Fuller, challenge the republic’s adherence to its own values. The works of authors like Stephen Burroughs, Martha Meredith Read, and Sarah Savage expose the ways that the restrictive politics of republicanism disenfranchised non-voting laborers. Burroughs, Read, and Savage
represent a demographic of Americans who were supposed to be represented by the political system and whose writings directly address this paradox of the early republic. These perspectives and presentations of republicanism call attention to not only public perception of shifting economic and political values but also the ways in which authors relied on familiar generic conventions to propose unconventional economic ideas.

Although portions of “Novel Economies” serve as a contrast to the productive potential enjoyed by men like Franklin, Cooper, and Emerson, it by no means accounts for the complete exclusion from republican privilege experienced by enslaved African Americans. Frederick Douglass poignantly describes this exclusion when he is given the “liberty” to hire himself out and to make his own labor contracts while agreeing to forfeit a significant portion of his weekly wages to his master; he explains, “I endured all the evils of a slave, and suffered all the care and anxiety of a freeman” (Douglass 418-19). Where republican rhetoric long promised that economic opportunity would offer immigrants and American settlers “liberty” from the class hierarchies and social immobility of England and Europe, Douglass quickly disabuses his readers of that pretense by reminding them of the fettered labor of the slave and of the many white men who achieved social mobility and prosperity from their slaves’ generative labor. The illusion of Douglass’ economic self-sufficiency is overridden by republican political and public definitions of who can be a legal, voting U.S. citizen. Writers such as David Walker, Harriet Jacobs, Elleanor Eldridge, Martin Delaney, and many others used the tropes of republican economic freedom to challenge the ways enslaved or freed African Americans were given access to the tools of generative production without having the legal and political protections that would allow them to truly profit. These authors
provide valuable insight into the hypocrisy of republican ideology, and “Novel Economies” recognizes the role that enslaved and disenfranchised African American labor played in enabling the economic changes that this project tracks. “Novel Economies” does, however, attend to writers, like Franklin and Cooper, who saw slavery as an absurd contradiction to the nation’s republican ethos and its dependence on slave labor. In contrast to Franklin and Cooper’s assumption that slavery would eventually be rendered obsolete by economics, chapter five focuses on Emerson’s antislavery public lectures and presents the issue of large-scale agrarian labor as integral to the American populace’s eventual acceptance of large-scale industrialism. Put another way, this project highlights popular literary works’ role in what Poovey calls “mediating value,” or in the context of early American, in expanding the value of generative labor in order to foster economic growth and to challenge traditional economic forms.

Starting with the colonial period and the progression of republican values from a scheme designed to encourage British expatriation to a source of American national pride, “Novel Economies” opens by establishing the ways agrarian and commercial economic agendas and labor became mutually enabling before turning to the second and third chapters which offer narratives exposing and challenging the circumscribed elitism of republican economic values. Then, “Novel Economies” returns to the works of white, male authors to track the ways in which agrarian, republican ideals fed the discourses of imperial expansion and antislavery rhetoric and allowed them to endorse industrial capitalism. The final two chapters reveal the ways that the capaciously defined virtues of economic republicanism continued to appear in and to influence the ways authors sought to educate and enlighten their audiences on political issues. This structure illuminates the
powerful role that republican values played in shaping public perception of generative labor and economic forms and also, in turn, reveals the ways that literature not only recorded these economic changes but, even more significantly, catalyzed them.

Literary rhetoric is both idealistic and realistic when it defines virtue in relation to commercial development and expands the definition of a generative populace, laws, and production. The first chapter of “Novel Economies” focuses on Benjamin Franklin, arguably America’s earliest “economic man,” whose works sparked not only economic change but also some of the first scholarly theories linking popular writings to the public’s perception of economic virtue. Franklin initially promoted the colonies’ generative labor and “unsettled land” as assets for the British Empire, and his idealistic hypotheses enabled him to imagine America as a self-sufficient economic entity, distinct in its ability to attract immigrants and to produce enough resources to support a transatlantic populace. Where Franklin’s rhetoric is deeply connected to the history of agrarian production in the early republic, it is also staunchly committed to expanding the public’s understanding of property-ownership and productive labor. By equating that which generates production, profit, or people with virtue, Franklin redefines the value of property and commodity, instilling both with the potential to foster republican and public wellbeing. Indeed, Franklin motivates his readers to action by celebrating their labor as a way to contribute to the public good without establishing an ideal way for this civic participation to occur. Not only did Franklin’s imaginative writings familiarize the public with the value of a diversified economy, they also helped to elevate the value of literature and the role that an author could play in transforming the ideals of American society.
The two chapters that follow Franklin focus on presenting the voices of laborers disenfranchised within the republican system. Chapter two offers a direct contrast between Franklin’s *Autobiography* and America’s first criminal memoir, Stephen Burroughs’ eponymous memoirs, published only eight years after Franklin’s text. *The Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs* (1798) relies on generic conventions of the autobiography and the familiar story of the common man’s struggles to find and understand his place within the republican values governing American sociopolitical and economic spheres. This chapter uses Burroughs’ manipulation of republican values to explore the ways the logics of commercial capitalism were embedded in American culture prior to their legal sanctification. Focusing on Burroughs’ imprisonment allows “Novel Economies” to explore the mutually enabling relationship between the republican myth and capitalist expansion as dependent upon America’s legal system. Although Burroughs’ *Memoirs* is a compelling critique of republicanism in its own right, when paired with later, legal efforts to optimize national, fiscal growth through manipulating the rhetoric of the public good, the popular text and its discussion of prison reform anticipate the ways in which the “humanization” of the corporate institution would coopt the rights of the individual. By reading the prison as an institutional precursor for the Supreme Court case of *Dartmouth v. Woodward* and the legalized appropriation of individual rights, then Burroughs’s *Memoirs* reveals how the institution is legally able to exploit the meaning of and access to citizen rights.

The third chapter of “Novel Economies” traces how seduction and sentimental literature and republican political ideals concomitantly prized women’s virtue and labor while dismissing women’s voices within the sociopolitical arena. Martha Meredith
Read’s epistolary novel *Margaretta: or, the Intricacies of the Heart* (1807) and Sarah Savage’s novella *The Factory Girl* (1814) expose how the seduction novel treated women as objects to be possessed where the sentimental genre changed ideals of female virtue in order to accommodate women as a labor force in a commodity market. The rhetoric surrounding the generic shift from the seduction novel to the sentimental novel is typically seen as signifying a moment of empowerment through suggesting that women have the option to choose whether to succumb to emotion in the face of temptation (Davidson 200). But, both *Margaretta* and *The Factory Girl* present a reconstituted notion feminine virtue in relation to shifting economic structures and republican ideals about labor that returns them from the socioeconomic arena back to the domestic space.7 Ultimately, these two texts expose how gendered attempts at economic agency were thwarted by the rise of republican and sentimental rhetoric, and reading novels like *Margaretta* or *The Factory Girl* that, albeit unsuccessfully, envision alternative models of productive labor expose how quickly the United States began to homogenize its approach to political, economic, and social empowerment.

Transitioning from Jeffersonian to Jacksonian definitions of republicanism, the fourth and fifth chapters of “Novel Economies” explore the ways that American authors began to redefine the values associated with land and labor as commercial assets. After the War of 1812, the U.S.’s physical and fiscal expansion demanded that the polity reconsider its relationship to land and agrarian economics and authors, like James Fenimore Cooper, depended upon the expansion of the commodity market and a

---

7 Namely, once republican virtue was decoupled from land-ownership, then all kinds of labor and productive generation could be celebrated as contributions to the public good; however, the Jeffersonian Republicans proceeded to then limit civic participation along the lines of gender and race instead of economic and social rank (Boydston 252).
successful U.S. economy to earn a living. When land becomes something other than a symbol for conquest or territorial acquisition, then it becomes an “unromantic” commodity, caught between republican projections of economic strength and concerns about slow economic progress. Land and wealth appear in Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821) as in conflict; the novel combines the two genres associated with Cooper’s work and the land, the domestic romance and historical adventure, and in so doing, it challenges agrarian labor and republican, land-based economics as limiting the national economy. Pairing *The Spy* with *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Prairie* (1827) demonstrates the ways Cooper’s novels adjusted these literary genres to the changing economic climate, utilizing capitalist rhetoric to “conquer” the profits that emerge from cultivating the land and to portray land as yielding more than exportable resources. Rather than view land as a privileged site of individual resource production, Cooper’s texts retroactively celebrate labor and imperial expansion as ways to transform territory into trade routes, canals, and large-scale commodity production. Adding Cooper’s voice to an archive of American writers whose works circulated the logics of commercial capitalism shows the ways literature both participated in and encouraged the populace to think of the economics of land as extending beyond the virtues of agrarian production.

The closing chapter of “Novel Economies” charts the evolution of republicanism to the Civil War, using Ralph Waldo Emerson’s speeches and popular writings to understand how the political values and virtues of republicanism conserved order and power for select members of society while also provoking economic change. What is revealed is that these republican lectures, designed to educate the populace, powerfully shaped the U.S.’s transition to large-scale industrialism and a federalized economic
agenda after the Civil War dealt a significant blow to large-scale agrarian production. Emerson’s public speeches from his 1837 address to Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society to his 1863 “Fortune of the Republic” declaration all demonstrate the ways republican rhetoric truly empowered the populaces’ acceptance of commercialism. By analyzing how Emerson’s lectures draw on republican rhetoric to disapprove of slavery while also expanding valuations of labor to endorse all other forms of work, “Novel Economies” reveals the ways Franklin’s economic agendas evolved as Emerson combated the evils of slavery. When taken as a whole, these readings elucidate the mutually enabling ways in which a study of republican economic values and literature’s adoption and adaption of those values revises the teleology of American economic history to highlight how these economic changes were introduced to and became palatable to the populace.

Turning from Emerson’s critique of agrarian republican values to those of Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, “Novel Economies” presents a brief coda exploring Southern, pro-slavery Americans’ perception of their role in the national economy. This coda highlights how omnipresent republican ideals were. Even as Tucker’s novel fantasizes about national disunion and a destabilized America, his characters and descriptions of an independent Virginia and autonomous South contend with the changing terms of republican virtue and economic production to imagine the realities of secession. This brief analysis of Tucker’s _The Partisan Leader_ broadens “Novel Economies’” discussion of literature’s engagement with and adaptation of republicanism’s prescriptions for national strength and solvency beyond regional economic disparity. It encourages further study into literature’s investment in economic issues to expose narrative as more than a
representation of the populace’s reaction to economic change but as a key catalyst to economic change.

Analyzing this wide-range of generic forms over the course of the colonial, early Republic, and antebellum periods when American literature emerged as a nationalizing force and the U.S. economy emerged as a global, capitalistic force, “Novel Economies” demonstrates how republican values helped to reconstitute the terms of generative labor for an industrial society. The ideas and ideals of republicanism are assumed to be the founding narratives of American politics, but their impact on the evolution of economic forms in the U.S. was arguably much larger. By rewriting the teleological trajectory of the evolution of industrial capitalism through its agrarian roots, this project illuminates the ways in which American literary works adopted and adapted the rhetoric of republicanism to catalyze this change, and in so doing it portrays the deep-seated connection between literature, public perception, and capitalism. Therefore, by revealing the mutually enabling relationship between literature and industrial capitalism, “Novel Economies” not only provides an alternative beginning for the story so often told about the evolution of the U.S. economic forms; it also offers an unconventional way to understand the role the populace and public perception play in large-scale economic change. As geopolitical alliances shift, technology advances, and business practices change, attending to the way in which popular reception enables economic development proves to be a timely yet understudied way to use economic history to anticipate future fiscal potential.

Works Cited

Alexander, Gregory S. Commodity and Propriety: Competing Visions of Property in


Coates A.W. “What is American About American Economics.” The Economic Mind in


Marx, Leo. The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America.


Rice, Grantland S. *The Transformation of Authorship in America*. Chicago: U of Chicago


CHAPTER ONE

A Generative Populace: Benjamin Franklin’s Economic Agendas

Benjamin Franklin emerges as a point of origin for many different aspects of United States culture; he is rarely missing from debates about the texts and authors that catalyzed the tradition of American letters, and he is also a Founding Father of republican ideology (Davidson 137-55; Wood, Americanization 215-17). When it comes to economics, Franklin’s fiscal models have been invoked across a spectrum of work on political economy. Karl Marx critiqued T. R. Malthus’s An Essay on the Principle of Population for its “schoolboyish, superficial plagiary” (qtd. in Huzel 20) of Franklin’s populationist economic models, amongst those of others. Max Weber credited Franklin’s Autobiography with embodying “the spirit of American capitalism,” thereby invoking his iconic life narrative as the progenitor of an entirely different set of political economy ideals (9-11). These divergent analyses demonstrate the flexibility of Franklin’s economic rhetoric. Although his works recognized the potential of agrarian republicanism, Franklin’s economic theories and popular writings also used the limitations of an agricultural economy to push for commercialism in the colonies and early Republic. Franklin quantified labor and valued productive work as contributions to the public good. In writing texts that identified and prescribed virtuous behavior and then transforming the production, sale, and purchase of those texts into a virtuous act, Franklin’s belle lettristic writings and his economic prescriptions worked in tandem to demonstrate how individual labor and American commerce served the common welfare.

Franklin’s 1751 populationist tract, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.,” provides a quantitative and qualitative

---

8 Reprinted from Early American Literature, Vol. 51, Number 3 (2016).
examination of the relationship between a growing populace and land availability and use to comment upon British economic policy in relation to American economic potential. The populationist hypothesis imagines an ideal ratio where the size of a nation’s populace is evenly complimented by the amount of resources it produces, and when these figures are balanced, the polity becomes economically self-sufficient and stable. In “Observations,” Franklin adopts and adapts the theories of seventeenth-century British demographers who analyzed census figures alongside data recording land use, resource production, and import trade. Further, these demographers linked the long-term health of a country to its inhabitants and their ability to generate wealth (Carey 25-28).

“Observations” exaggerates the potential yield of colonial agricultural production and sets high expectations for America’s laboring public, establishing the ideals that became central to Franklin’s economic thinking. Populationist theory was a part of the evolution of modern economic theory; Franklin used its emphasis on productive labor and self-sufficiency to make commercialism agreeable to a populace that was primarily committed to agrarian, republican values.

In Franklin’s day, the dream that ample land would provide the basis for a thriving society was a powerful force in policy debates and in more literary efforts to imagine America’s future. American populationist theory advocated for agrarian production at a moment when the English “public mind” was absorbed in its “mixed admiration of and horror at the factory . . . [and the] omnipresent problem of the unprofitable poor” (Heilbroner 52). Well before Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia and Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer, the English promoted the “utopian dream of settling on a wilderness farm in America . . .
[and this dream] lent ideological meaning to landed property in America and thereby determined its economic value” (Verhoeven 12). America’s vast expanses of “unsettled,” cultivatable land appeared as the answer to the resource production and urban crowding problems plaguing England. In recent years, historians who have studied landholdings, agricultural production, shipping demands, and involuntary labor practices have debunked the myth that early America was an economic utopia founded on available land (Matson 27-33). An “abundance of land became colonists’ most important economic resource,” yet the economic growth it provided has been exaggerated (Matson 26; Mancall and Weiss 17-19). The tract exaggerates the potential yield of colonial agricultural production, and its high expectations for America’s laboring public became central to Franklin’s economic thought.

Franklin extols the virtues of labor and productive generation, demonstrating his writings’ value as a rhetorical point of connection between the public, literature, and economics in early America. Franklin’s business and nonfiction writings—such as “The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to Her Colonies” (1760), the “Deed of Settlement” for the Philadelphia Fire Insurance Contributionship (1752), “An Economical Project” (1784), and “Information for Those Who Would Remove to America” (1784)—were not simply ideals he projected to the public, they were principles he put into practice with his own businesses. By using his entrepreneurial accomplishments as the basis for his economic prescriptions (Rice 51), Franklin’s popular writings take the familiar values of agrarianism and repurpose them in service of a commercial agenda. He celebrates commercial exchange as a source of communal good will, able to curtail the corrupting influence of avaricious passions (Breitwieser 203). Poor Richard’s Almanack (1733-58)
and the *Autobiography* (1771-90) engage with the agrarian tenets of populationist theory to identify with readers. The *Almanack’s* aphorisms and advice and the *Autobiography’s* moralistic parables narrate stories familiar to early American readers: the hardships of immigration, the toil of establishing oneself in the colonies, and the limitations of a barter economy. Although Franklin’s writings rely on the shared experience of hardship to connect with readers, these works talk of labor as accompanied by the potential for economic success. Ultimately, this article reads across Franklin’s canon of writings to demonstrate the ways his celebration of generative labor made commercialism became palatable to the American populace, and how his professional career and *belle lettres* made literature a participant in and a champion of the virtues of the commodity market.

**An Economic Franklin**

Franklin’s “Observations” anticipates a synthesis between the American reading public and its political economy agendas, and the tract’s rhetoric suggests that individual productivity and profit are necessary for building national political and economic health. Douglas Anderson has written: “Franklin is the first to sense the imaginative possibilities of [the colonies’] rich intellectual climate, to find formal means of making the apparent disorder and multiplicity of his culture subservient to larger moral and political ends” (xiv). Franklin’s populationist principles envisioned the power of American labor and contributed to the evolution of commercial republicanism through celebrating the virtues of a generative populace. In contrast to earlier readings of Franklin as a protocapitalist, scholars now interpret his political and economic models as community-centered and reframe his writings as a part of the republican political tradition (Glazener 207-10;
Looby 100-01; Olson 233). Republicanism initially valued property ownership, agrarian resource production, and a virtuous citizenry (Alexander 37). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a “reworking of what commerce meant was at the core of a general process of redefinition of principal republican terms (i.e. ‘virtue,’ ‘corruption,’ and ‘luxury’) that was the basis for the broader redefinition of American republicanism from its civic form to a commercial form” (Alexander 63). Early American commercialism remained attentive to republican social values and advocated against an unconstrained, large-scale market for fear that it would cause rampant corruption (Alexander 14).

Franklin’s economic writings transform modern financial activities and concepts, such as speculation, underwriting, and paper currency, into opportunities for individuals to influence and ensure the public good (Baker 4, Wertheimer 28, Breitwieser 216-17).

Accounting for Franklin’s commitment to populationist, agrarian principles extends those conversations to illustrate the ways his writings encouraged the public to expand their definition of republican virtue and embrace commercialism.

If Franklin’s populationist tract is read as a part of a larger canon of political economy discourse or as a theory that influenced his subsequent economic writings, then “Observations” becomes a pivotal confirmation of and challenge to agrarian republican values. Previous approaches to the tract do not necessarily look at it within the context of republican values, neglecting its place amongst English, European, and American political economy history, both in works that preceded Franklin and continuing after him in the writings of Adam Smith, T. R. Malthus, Harriet Martineau, and others (Huzel 19-20). Douglas Anderson, Dennis Hodgson, and Carla Mulford study Franklin’s tract as a reaction to the economic restrictions imposed by the Empire and propose that
“Observations” was an attempt to persuade the British of the benefits of free trade and economically independent colonies (Anderson 161; Hodgson 639-61; Mulford 142-52).

By focusing on tropes associated with republicanism as dictated by the British Empire—such as Anderson’s study of the tract’s championing of an Anglo-Saxon population (159) or Mulford’s discussion of “Observations”’ attention to land use and the social and environmental consequences of colonization economics (155-56)—these scholars locate these issues within the politics of imperialism without considering their continued influence over Franklin’s writings or the ideas that shaped America’s political economy landscape. Franklin’s populationist rhetoric is idealistic and realistic, working to expand the definition of a generative populace, laws, and production in ways that eventually enabled the public to perceive commerce and large-scale manufacturing as advancing the United States’ foundational political and economic missions.

“Observations” demonstrates the ways republican ideals involved the populace in large-scale economic changes and forwarded the colonists’ sense of their own autonomy and self-sufficiency. The publication of “Observations” coincides with the Seven Year’s War, a turning point in American-British relations. While fighting in North America, the British realized that if the colonists could purchase their goods then they could also be taxed (Breen 200-01). These taxes and the Acts of Trade and Navigation prompted colonial ire and dissent (Breen 88-89). As tensions between the British and Americans mounted, “Observations” reminds readers in the metropole that it is in their best interest to allow the colonies to generate resources and goods, and it also proposes the moral as well as financial benefits of a more diverse economy. Populationist economic theory
acknowledges that the public’s labor is necessary for building economic strength, and “Observations” is a calculated projection of the value of that labor.

Franklin presents quantitative evidence in “Observations” that contrasts America’s growth potential with the disproportionate ratios of resource production, population growth, and available land in England. His “[t]ables of the Proportions of Marriages to Births, of Deaths to Births, or Marriages to the Numbers of Inhabitants, &c.” idealize the perfect statistical measure of the colonies’ reproductive public proportionate to their productive capabilities (215). Franklin proposes that the American populace, through natural generation and immigration, would double in size every twenty years, hence surpassing the strength of the British Empire (“Observations” 216). He predicts that an influx of people in the colonies will increase per capita wealth and uses the promises of land and community to attract immigrants, writing that “The Importation of Foreigners into a Country that has as many Inhabitants as the present Employments and Provisions for Subsistence will bear, will be in the End no Increase of People, unless the New Comers have more Industry and Frugality than the Natives, and then they will provide more Subsistence, and increase in the Country; but they will gradually eat the Natives out” (“Observations” 219-20). An influx of immigrants would expand colonial control over the territory and assuage concerns that the colonists’ hold over the land might be as tentative as that of its indigenous inhabitants. Additionally, populationist theory predicts that more inhabitants increase collective worth. Population growth leads to economic stability if the populace values their work as more than a way to generate personal wealth; thus, Franklin presents industry and frugality as habits that contribute to the public good.
Despite Franklin’s celebration of the character and constitution of British America’s laboring populace, his writings consistently reassess the ways quantified labor and productive work contribute to the public good. In his computational quest to hypothesize the maximum potential of labor and land, Franklin rejects slavery as an economic advantage, namely because relying on enslaved workers divorces landowners from their responsibilities and allows the populace to indulge their personal proclivities rather than upholding their obligation to foster the public good. Populationist theory and agrarian republicanism equate an investment in one’s own property with an investment in the common good, making agricultural labor a virtuous act. But this investment is compromised when landowners do not work their own property. Over the course of his life, Franklin became vehement in his opposition to slavery and served as the President of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (Campbell 751). Rather than make a moral argument against slavery in “Observations,” Franklin argues economically: “‘Tis an ill-grounded Opinion that by the Labour of Slaves, America may possibly vie in Cheapness of Manufactures with Britain. The Labour of Slaves can never be so cheap here as the Labor of working Men is in Britain. Any one may compute it” (217). Drawing a precise contrast between the cost of purchasing, insuring, clothing, housing, feeding, and maintaining slaves and the cost of paying wage laborers, Franklin quantifies why slavery is a bad fiscal investment for the colonies. American agrarianism could “vie” with British manufactures in terms of productive potential, but an agrarian society is susceptible to the temptation of slavery, and its public is susceptible to corruption.
Franklin is staunchly opposed to “Planting [the Sons of Africa] in America,” and relies on populationist theory to corroborate his objections: “while we are, as I may call it, Scouring our planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we darken its People?” (“Observations” 221). Franklin’s claims foreshadow late nineteenth-century eugenicist arguments, especially as he describes the need for superior white beings in America (“Observations” 221). When read as an economic agenda, this quote anticipates more than Franklin’s eventual rejection of slavery and the evolution of racist science. It presents an agrarian metaphor to show slavery as economically antithetical to republican values. The work of “scouring” America of woods implies the clearing of forest to create cultivatable land. Franklin discourages the “planting” of Africans in America and the way the slave trade distances the colonial populace from the demands of property ownership and agrarian labor. If populationist theory illuminates the potential of the colonists and encourages their labor, then slave labor is counterproductive to Franklin’s desire to build individual investment in the community through labor. Franklin’s concern about “darken[ing America’s] people” refers to the darkening of the populace through the forced migration of African slaves and to a darkening or mudding of the colonists’ commitment to their own economic welfare.

Along with impeding America’s economic development, slavery undermines a populace’s virtue by allowing the public to blindly follow their biased beliefs instead of fostering their independent reasoning and logic. Although not his key point of critique, Franklin condemns racially based prejudices as exemplary of flawed human values when he writes, “But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such Kind of
Partiality is natural to Mankind” (“Observations” 221). Adopting the voice of those who favor their own countrymen, Franklin describes “partiality” as “natural to Mankind” and implies that racial preferences are idiosyncratic. Instead of reading rationales for slavery as a product of personal bias, “Observations” critiques populations that allow subjective opinions to dictate their polity’s economic, political, and social agendas. Franklin has established that slavery is detrimental to the colonies’ economic future; if the populace indulges these unfounded partialities, they are choosing to harm their economic prospects. Franklin fears that the public might follow their antiquated proclivities rather than his carefully hypothesized economic theories. Populationist theory celebrates the populace and defines their labor as integral to economic health. Franklin’s optimistic projections are destabilized by the possibility that his readers will not embrace his model exchanging personal profit for the Empire’s economic wellbeing.

Franklin’s populationist argument focuses on a growing economy, not necessarily an agrarian economy, and in so doing, he must convince the British and the colonists of the virtues of a vibrant, commercial economy. America’s labor, land, and resources had the potential to benefit England (“Observations” 215-19), but those profits and payoffs could not occur within the circumscribed economy. Franklin explains, “[S]o vast is the territory of North America, that it will require many Ages to settle it fully; and till it is fully settled, labor will never be cheap here, where no man continues long a laborer for others, but gets a Plantation of his own, no man continues long a journeyman to a trade, but goes among those new Settlers and sets up for himself” (“Observations” 216). Republican values championed America’s bounty of land as the embodiment of economic opportunity, self-employment, and property ownership (Verhoeven 23).
Nevertheless, the idyllic economic potential of agrarianism is not limitless; land is a finite commodity so Franklin stresses the importance of trade along with natural resource production. By asserting that it will “require many Ages” to “settle” North America “fully,” Franklin suggests that the colonies will capitalize upon the land before turning to commercial opportunities, minimizing any fears that the American economy could overtake that of the British. He is diplomatic, managing both parties’ wishes by asserting that a generative colonial populace can be an asset to themselves and the Empire. Franklin’s populationist writings connect individual profit to national wellbeing, and although his rhetoric does so through venerating agrarian resource production, Franklin anticipates the potential of and need for a diversified American economy.

Politics and economics intersect in the American marketplace. Franklin demonstrates his commitment to the republican link between politics and economics when he asserts that political leaders are responsible for enabling the populace to earn a profit:

[T]he Legislator that makes effectual Laws for promoting of Trade, increasing Employment, improving Land by more or better Tillage; providing more Food by Fisheries; securing Property, &c. and the Man that invents new Trades, Arts or Manufactures, or new Improvements in Husbandry, may be properly called Fathers of their Nation, as they are the Cause of the Generation of Multitudes” (218-19).

A leader is praised for his ability to ensure his people’s economic health, and similarly, innovators and entrepreneurs are “Fathers of their nation,” esteemed as leaders for creating more efficient labor practices or advancing commerce. The public perceives their
leaders as competent and measures their general contentment on the basis of access to employment, trade, and land. “Generation,” as it appears in the passage above, celebrates how economic activity can attract, build, and foster citizen’s loyalty. Resource production and commerce are equally important to political founding, and a legislator’s ability to catalyze economic entrepreneurialism in any form indicates the potential for the people’s long-term generative ability.

Franklin’s unabashed support for economic advancement occurs in spite of his political loyalty to the British. In its exploration of the intersection of politics and economics, “Observations” is critical of the ways the Acts of Trade and Navigation reinforced the colonists’ dependence on Britain for manufactured imports and trade. The Empire’s monopoly on the import/export trade of manufactured goods limits the colonies and the colonists’ economic prospects: “Foreign luxuries and needless Manufactures imported and used in a Nation, do, by the same Reasoning, increase the People of the Nation that furnishes them, and diminish the People of the Nation that uses them—Laws therefore that prevent such Importations, and on the contrary promote the Exportation of Manufactures . . . may be called generative Laws” (“Observations” 219). Manufacturing and commerce are generative according to Franklin’s populationist equation. However, any populace that depends on importing goods because it is prevented from manufacturing is unable to fulfill its economic and population potential. Franklin’s focus on the generative—in terms of people and commerce—subordinates the importance of agrarian resource production to the colonies’ ability to promote and increase its population through growing its economy. This call for regulatory measures and laws to
protect America’s economy and businesses suggests Franklin’s belief that the colonies could and should be allowed to thrive on the global market.

The American colonies’ economic relationship with the British Empire provided the rhetorical basis for Franklin’s expansion of populationist economic ideals. Franklin relied on the colonists’ generative desire as well as the British desire for a balanced economy to challenge and condemn the restrictions the Empire placed on American commerce and liberty. Opportunistically, Franklin used the colonists’ participation in the Seven Years War to remind the British of their loyalty to the crown as well as their role within the Empire’s economy (Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin* xvii, 258). The colonists helped the British attack the French in North America, gaining new territory at the expense of American lives and resources. Franklin wrote “The Interest of Great Britain Considered, With Regard to Her Colonies” (1760) to critique two anonymous pamphlets—*Letter addressed to Two Great Men* and *Remarks*—that were published in support of allowing the French to keep their toehold in Canada. Franklin disagreed with the anonymous writer’s claim that building forts will be sufficient to protect the colonists against French incursion into British American territory, and instead, he appeals to his readers’ financial pragmatism, emphasizing that land yields both economic and territorial power. Americans desire the reassurance that their land possessions are secure and that they will not be provoked into another war to defend the British North American territory, he argues (“The Interest of Great Britain Considered”). Land is valuable because it is the site of resource production and of commodity generation, preserving the colonists’ claim to the land preserves their economy. Additionally, war is expensive, so rather than fortifying against potential attack with strategically placed structures, Franklin
argues for removing the potential threat of war and the expenses associated with it by removing the French from North America.

Franklin leverages the British desire to monopolize commercial trade in North America to suggest that the Empire acquire Canada, expanding the colonial territories and enabling the colonial economy to grow according to populationist tenets. Franklin predicts the economic benefit of an expanded, North American marketplace: “this nation must necessarily supply them with the manufactures they consume, because the new settlers will be employ’d in agriculture, and the new settlements will so continually draw off the spare hands from the old, that our present colonies will not, during the period we have mention’d find themselves in a condition to manufacture even for their own inhabitants” (Franklin, “The Interest of Great Britain Considered”). But those spoils are not simply to the benefit of England. In spite of his statement that “our present colonies will not… find themselves in a condition to manufacture,” Franklin implies a progression from new settlers and agrarian labor that will eventually lead to established inhabitants and commercial endeavors. Franklin fires a warning shot, one that flies past the prospect of political autonomy and suggests colonial economic independence.

A generative economy is defined by its inhabitants’ productivity and their ability to consume; these characteristics represent the promise of a strong financial future as well as security and protection. Franklin’s business and economic writings look forward, and although his methods for growing America economy shift depending on his audience, he reiterates the populationist ideal that the individual’s labor and actions can and should serve the public interest. Having accounted for the benefits of protecting the colonies’ current economic resources, Franklin’s next assertions look to America’s economic
future and to avenues for profit that extend beyond political borders and the limits of the Acts of Trade and Navigation. He writes:

Our trade to the West-India islands is undoubtedly a valuable one: but whatever is the amount of it, it has long been at a stand. Limited as our sugar planters are by the scantiness of territory, they cannot increase much beyond their present number; and this is an evil, as I shall show hereafter, that will be little helped by our keeping Guadaloupe. The trade to our Northern Colonies is not only greater but yearly increasing with the increase of people; and even in a greater proportion as the people increase in wealth and the ability of spending as well as in numbers. (Franklin, “The Interest of Great Britain Considered”)

Franklin uses the tenets of populationist theory as well as customhouse accounts, land availability maps, and demographic data to compare the potential proceeds from trade with Island of Guadaloupe and French Canada. He concludes that Guadaloupe will not grow the Empire’s or the colonies’ economy because its “scantiness of territory” means that the population “cannot increase much beyond their present number.” Indeed, Franklin was correct: Canada proved to be a better trading partner for the colonies than Guadaloupe because the British West Indies stymied American economic growth. The Northern colonies’ economy exported flour, bread, and other products, but they could only trade with the sugar colonies and England (Egnal 47). Despite his promise, Franklin does not exactly address why Guadaloupe’s constraints are evil, but he does discuss the ways the purchase of British manufactures increases proportionally to increases in the American populace. Similar to his arguments in “Observations,” Franklin’s critique of
Guadalupe’s sugar plantations and their “£300,000 in sugar [export]” disparages slavery for monopolizing the labor market with workers who cannot be consumers. Slaves cannot purchase manufactures nor can their labor produce an investment in the public good; therefore, slavery destabilizes economic health (“The Interest of Great Britain Considered”). Franklin’s praise of Canada’s vast expanse of inhabitable land and his condemnation of Guadalupe’s stagnant economy embodies his fears that the Trade and Navigation Acts could ultimately prevent the American colonies from being a generative force within the global economy.

Along with advocating for America to be a strong presence in the global commodity market, Franklin also sought to present the colonies as a stable, domestic economy. Franklin’s business models demonstrate the value and virtues of commodities and commercial exchange in relation to the common good; his entrepreneurial activities are his idealistic theories put into realistic practice. In 1752, only one year after he wrote “Observations,” Franklin crafted the “Deed of Settlement” for the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, promoting populationist models in light of the populace’s personal and economic interests. The demand for insurance bespeaks the presence of a permanent population with enough wealth to safeguard their possessions. Insurance indicates a social understanding of the value of personal property and commercial goods, imbuing them with worth and “plac[ing] the individual’s fortunes within a network of wealth that was held collectively” (Wertheimer 2). The business model for the Philadelphia Contributionship asks policyholders to contribute the capital that insures their property. Then, if profits accrue after the initial buy-ins, the gains are shared amongst the policyholders (James 40-41). Fire insurance
fulfills the community’s desire to protect individual wealth, and colonial insurance companies encourage settlement with the promise of institutions to protect accumulated wealth. Although the individual turned to insurance for security, the business operated as a collective dependent upon its members’ demand and wealth to make it necessary.

The Philadelphia Contributionship’s Deed adopts and adapts Franklin’s populationist theory; instead of the individual’s work contributing to the public good, now the individual’s sense of security becomes a measure of collective prosperity. The guarantees of protection offered by insurance rhetorically linked communal economic security to an individual’s fiscal contribution (Wertheimer 2). The “Deed of Settlement” proposes the following tenets: “we the said Subscribers hereunto, as well as for our own mutual Security, as for the common Security and Advantage of our Fellow-Citizens and Neighbors, and for the Promoting of so great and public Good as the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, upon the most equal Terms” (Franklin, “Deed” 283). Fire spreads quickly and quickly affects a neighborhood or a community. Throughout the “Deed,” Franklin links the individual to his fellow-citizens to show how one person’s actions (or investment in security) can shield those who surround him. He links security to the city’s inhabitants’ best interests and reinforces the theory that a collective goal shores up political and economic stability. Insurance extends peace of mind beyond the policyholder to the community, and its availability “upon the most equal Terms” suggests the benefits of widespread investment in the public’s security. The idea that an individual subscriber’s insurance provides protection to his or her neighbors is vaguely open-ended; however, it is a concept that Franklin repeats in the Contributionship’s description of the ways its company directors are responsible to their policyholders.
Franklin uses the “Deed” to further define the ideals of non-agrarian generative labor; in holding the Contributionship’s directors accountable to the policyholders and public, he outlines a form of work that fosters communal security through the exchange of money for service, or a symbol of wealth for a symbol of security. The Philadelphia Contributionship directors must monitor insurance claims and “shall with all convenient Speed upon all Alarms of Fire, repair to and convene together … to consult and determine upon such Methods as may in such Cases most conduce to the safety of this Society and the Service of the Public” (Franklin, “Deed” 288). The board of directors was the original claim investigators, assessing how fire damage impacted the policyholders as well as “the Public.” The presence of the directors at every fire advertised the insurance company’s promise of communal support. The Contributionship also disclosed damage settlements in Philadelphia newspapers to legitimate the business and prove that it was fulfilling its obligation to its policyholders (Franklin, “Deed” 288). Franklin’s insurance company performed the utilitarian benefits of communal power and emphasized individual security and gain, and as these business practices spread, they enacted and encouraged the idea that collective stability would bolster individual success.

In “Observations,” “The Interest of Great Britain,” and the “Deed,” Franklin celebrated agrarian and commercial profits and labor as an investment in the public good. Colonial agrarianism was initially encouraged on both sides of the Atlantic, but the association of land ownership with republican ideology became a “concept [that] increasingly pandered to the growth of [American] nationalism” (Verhoeven 23). After the Revolution, Franklin’s populationist ideals became overt endorsements of the virtues of commercialism, designed to appeal to the greater public. Two of Franklin’s
propagandistic and satiric tracts—“Information to Those who Would Remove to America” (1784) and “An Economical Project” (1784)—demonstrate how he adapted his economic theories, extolling the virtues of commercial exchange instead of land ownership. Drawing a sharp contrast between the United States’ potential and the problems facing England and Europe, Franklin’s tracts encourage emigration and highlight the nation’s economic prospects. His hyperbole is contrasted with scathing critiques of the opportunities available to citizens of other nations, and Franklin uses exaggerated rhetoric to spark the reader’s investment in his theories and to provoke the reader’s sense of urgency about his or her contribution to the public good.

Both “Observations” and “Information” describe America in utopian terms, but “Information” does so cautiously, hoping to attract immigrants who are willing to contribute their labor to the nation. Franklin endorses generative labor by contrasting the United States with Europe; he states, “less is it advisable for a Person to go thither who has no other Quality to recommend him but his Birth. In Europe it has indeed its Value, but it is a Commodity that cannot be carried to a worse Market than that of America” (342). Newcomers who depend upon their aristocratic heritage and lack productive drive are not welcome in the U.S. Immigrants need to possess valued or marketable skills, not simply class privilege. According to Franklin, the United States has more demand for skilled workers than for immigrants coming to capitalize on large expanses of cheap land or to build plantations where slaves and animals do all the work (“Information” 343). In this formulation, the U.S. is a market, and the commodity most desired and traded in this market is that of skilled, productive labor.
“Information” acknowledges that the U.S. is still a mostly agrarian economy, but Franklin acquaints his readers with the benefits of a diversified, agrarian and commercial economy: “Great Establishments of Manufacture, require great Numbers of Poor to do the Work for small Wages; these Poor are to be found in Europe, but will not be found in America, till the Lands are all taken up and cultivated, and the excess of People who cannot get Land, want Employment” (346). Commercialism is a necessary counterpart to American agrarianism, and by endorsing commercial exchange, Franklin sanctions his own entrepreneurial activities. However, commercialism was only to be pursued when “the Lands are all taken up and cultivated,” so the commercial market was a definitive next step for after agrarianism completely cultivated the land. Franklin is cognizant of the problems that initially sparked populationist theory, namely England’s inability to provide for an “excess of people [who] want employment,” and so, to ensure that the public’s needs are met, he advocates for economic development. Reading “Observations” next to “Information” highlights the reasons why Franklin incorporates commercialism into his methodologies for economic success and reveals his commitment to populationist theory, no matter the system of production.

Franklin’s discussions of manufacturing and commerce are not solely positive; his popular economic writings divulge his concerns that the United States could end up just like Europe and England, overpopulated and underproducing. Franklin exaggerates the disastrous consequences of a populace’s commodity dependency and the fecundity of resources available in the U.S. “An Economical Project” is a satiric letter he wrote to The Journal of Paris that contrasts the expense of using lamps or candles with simply living by sunlight. Franklin estimates how much money Parisians waste on candles – over
ninety-six million livres tournois over the course of six months (“Economical Project” 246). Candles, or commodities, replace a dependency on sunlight or natural resources, and Franklin uses this substitution to condemn the populace for their astronomical wastefulness. Franklin humorously proposes drastic punishments to end the lavish abuse of candlelight, such as: taxing those who shutter their windows, using the police to regulate candle purchases, and synchronizing church bells with the sunrise to set the populace’s schedule to the sun (“Economical Project” 246-47). These tongue-in-cheek propositions allude to the ways citizens can skew a nation’s fiscal reputation; the Parisians are unwilling to rise with the sun, and their “laziness” impacts perceptions of their economy’s stability. Franklin attunes his economic and commercial habits to his surroundings and encourages his readers to think of their personal habits as the source their nation’s fiscal health.

When read alongside one another, Franklin’s business and political economy tracts demonstrate his commitment to incorporating the public in the ever-shifting terms of productive contribution. Franklin’s populationist theory is not a plot designed to harness the people’s labor; his ideals about the population’s participation in the economy transformed them into a force responsible for the public good. The colonies’ initial focus on agrarianism did not produce the economic benefits anticipated, offering an explanation for why Franklin’s rhetoric is both deeply connected to the history of agrarian production in the early republic and also staunchly committed to expanding the public’s understanding of property-ownership and productive labor. By equating that which generates production, profit, or people with virtue, Franklin redefines the value of property and commodity, instilling both with the potential to foster republican and public
wellbeing. In his imaginative writings, Franklin shares his revised views with the actual laborers performing the agrarian and commercial work integral to political and economic stability. These works had the fortunate consequence of transforming literature into commodities that can instruct in the methods of economic virtue.

**Franklin’s *Belle Lettres***

Franklin’s writings alternate between hyperbolic optimism and productive unease: a dynamic that brings to the forefront conversations about the role prose plays in connecting the populace to an economic master-narrative. Nathaniel Hawthorne once critiqued *Poor Richard’s Almanack* for its economic focus; a character in Hawthorne’s *Biographical Stories for Children* states: “I have read some of those proverbs, but I do not like them. They are all about getting money, or saving it” (qtd. in Ensor 16). And Mark Twain declared that Franklin, in the *Autobiography*, “early prostituted his talents to the invention of maxims and aphorisms calculated to inflict suffering upon the rising generation of all subsequent ages” (qtd. in Ensor 17). By condemning Franklin for prostituting “his talents” and for writing “about getting money, or saving it,” Hawthorne and Twain assert a difference between literary writing and prescriptive economic advice and the value of their works and Franklin’s. Despite these criticisms, Franklin’s imaginative writings have maintained their value as texts that describe larger-picture political and economic issues and represent the everyday life of citizens. Poor Richard’s attention to personal economic issues was a way for the author to connect with the issues facing his readers. But that connection, according to Anderson, “loses significance in the face of . . . the larger narrative that subsumes it” (108), meaning that for Franklin the
moment of familiarity was designed to appeal to his readers but was not allowed to encroach upon the larger message of his text. Along these lines, Looby relates the virtue of individual economic activity to the public good and highlights how Franklin’s writings linked the fiscal actions of citizens to American interests (137-38). Houston takes this idea one step further: “Cooperation in a commercial society is based on utility. [U]sefulness . . . has to be cultivated personally, through the formation of habits of virtue, and collectively, through the political and economic integration of groups and interests” (59). Merging these three voices into one shows the ways that Franklin’s imaginative prose used tropes familiar to readers, linking productive labor and profit to virtue; however, these critics merely see this ethos as endorsing America’s commercial future.

Once republican agrarianism is recognized as the means through which the public was introduced to the expanded values of a diverse economy, then the educational undercurrent of republicanism—the sociopolitical importance it places on cultivating what Sandra Gustafson defines as a “deliberative” populace (37-39)—becomes integral to the economic expansion that Franklin’s writings were able to encourage and achieve. In this context, Franklin’s popular works do more than react to the economic climate at the time; they use republican values to influence the populace to advance the economic agendas the Founding Father prescribes.

The desire to isolate similarities or differences in Franklin’s economic and imaginative writings embodies what Elizabeth Hewitt identifies as the “vexed” or “tempestuous” “marriage between literary studies and economics,” where, on the one hand, “we have a desire for their intimacy” and, on the other hand, “we have the reassertion of the fundamentally different methodologies and archives of the two
disciplines” (618). The emphasis given to Franklin’s canon and its reception often revises the vexed or tempestuous inconsistencies in his popular presentations of his economic theories: namely the contradictory ways in which his popular writings use agrarian hardships to identify with the American populace while also advocating for commerce and entrepreneurship. As Eric Wertheimer states, “Franklin, at some level, had to acknowledge and understand the problem of fear and perhaps, more important, become expert in learning how to contain and deflect its most debilitating personal and social effects” (38). The commercial market provoked fear largely because of the ideals of republicanism: if land-ownership produced a virtuous citizenry, then a commercial marketplace corroded and destroyed those ties (Alexander 33). Therefore, Franklin’s rhetoric could not solely celebrate commerce; his writings had to account for the populace’s prejudices and fears otherwise they would alienate readers who were afraid of changing economic forms. As the majority of his canon reveals, “Franklin was concerned with immediate as well as distant posterity . . . His reputation . . . would have to spread through the whole community of man” (Breitwieser 204). Concerned with his own reputation as well as reception, Franklin sought to appeal to a broad audience and to forge a common “admiration for reason” amongst them (Breitwieser 203). In the context of Franklin’s economic agendas, this meant crafting popular works that were capacious, engaging with republican values and virtues in ways that promoted both agrarian and commercial revenue streams. Franklin saw potential in America’s diverse population, and his belle lettres illustrate how he used what was familiar to his audience to encourage them to harness their productive power and to foster the common good.
Franklin used the freedom of invented narrative and noms de plume to refigure his economic ideas into literary works designed for the general public. According to Stephen Shapiro, Franklin is “not only an early theoretician of institutional ideology; he is also perhaps one of the first writers to conceptualize literary texts as mediums implicated within actionable social power” (43). A host of exceptions appear once Franklin is pinpointed as the origin of literary texts catalyzing “actionable” “social power.” But, when Franklin’s popular works are conceptualized as both theoretical and motivational, then his texts do more than record “institutional ideology,” they reveal their influence over society’s values. Throughout Poor Richard’s Almanack and the Autobiography, Franklin experiments with ways to communicate the virtues of productive labor to his readers, and while he is prescriptive, he remains indefinite in his dictates. Unlike the moralizing of other authors at the time, Franklin’s values “cannot be shown to emanate from a coherent positive standard” (Breitwieser 190). Indeed, Franklin motivates his readers by celebrating their labor as a contribution to the public good without establishing an ideal way for this civic participation to occur. By crafting rhetoric that appealed to his wide-ranging audience and encouraged their labor, Franklin’s belle lettres participated in “the birth of an indigenous conception of authorship in America, one that deployed the amplifactory potential of discourse as the catalytic vehicle for meaningful civic agency and continual social and political reform” (Rice 33). Franklin’s imaginative writings introduced the value of a diversified economy to his reading public, and these works also elevated the value of literature and the role that an author could play in transforming a society’s economic ideals.
Poor Richard’s Almanack and Autobiography were written over a span of years, and they allow a reader to trace the ways Franklin redeployed his populationist models for a commercial economy. Poor Richard’s was the most successful almanac in colonial America (Wood, Americanization 53). Shaped by market forces and reader reception, Poor Richard’s tracks Franklin’s changing, adopted personas alongside changing economic agendas (Anderson 93-105). Franklin takes a genre familiar to those invested in agrarian productivity—the almanac—and plays with its content to create a new economic narrative; Poor Richard’s is more of a self-help text with lessons that relate the reader’s financial and moral values to the public good. Poor Richard links his personal economic situation to his success in addressing the agrarian community’s concerns: “[a]s to the Weather, if I were to fall into the Method my Brother J—n sometimes uses, and tell you, Snow here or in New England, --- Rain here or in South-Carolina, ---Cold to the Northward, ---Warm to the Southward, and the like, whatever Errors I might commit, I should be something more secure of not being detected in them” (Franklin 463). Poor Richard jokes that he only predicts the weather that his “Reader will have, be he where he will at the time” (Franklin 463). Although an almanac should provide “accurate” meteorological predictions, Poor Richard appeases his readers by telling them what they want to hear rather than risk making errors and losing his source of profit. The almanac is a commodity, and its success is dependent upon farmers having the means to purchase it. In choosing this generic form to reach his audience, Franklin invests in the ideal that agrarianism and commercialism are mutually enabling. Where Poor Richard can circumvent the premise of the almanac form and still benefit, his allusion to the weather and to the actual concerns of America’s farmers projects the problems of an agrarian
economy. By attending to yet not fully addressing agrarianism as an unreliable source of profit, this early *Almanack* entry can be read as a long-term fiscal projection, and it suggests that the populace’s desires—for ideal weather to cultivate economic success—might be easily theorized but not easily put into practice.

Alongside his nebulous references to concepts that may help the farmer, Poor Richard provides financial guidance for a developing economy. The almanac’s lengthy lists of truisms make it easy to pass over its suggestions for a commercial economy, yet the repeated themes reinforce the message that although one’s actions are perceived as self-directed, they do influence communal progress. Small sayings, like “[h]e that buys by the penny, maintains not only himself, but other people,” endorse buying within one’s community and doing so with ready money in order to circulate business (Franklin, *Poor Richard’s* 460). This aphorism asks citizens to be conscious of living in an economic collective where financial habits benefit more than the individual. This maxim was published seven years after Franklin wrote “A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency” and addressed ways a lack of currency hindered the colonies’ economic potential. Franklin praises the citizen who “buys by the penny,” highlighting the benefit of keeping money in circulation. Paper currency is increasingly important within a commercial economy, and in advocating for it, Franklin is both acclimating the public to its value as well as attempting to secure the tangible means through which the colonial economy will progress. *The Almanack* plainly explains to its readership how they can encourage the evolution of the colonies’ economy by creating more desire and demand for the means to build their fiscal foundation.
Franklin does not lose sight of republican or populationist ideals and concerns in his writings. To temper his endorsement of individual labor and personal profit, he acknowledges the very real concern that an unyielding pursuit of economic strength may give way to a corrupt society. In the 1749 edition of the *Almanack*, Poor Richard offers three precepts to teach a reader “How to get RICHES,” for, “All Men are not equally qualified for getting Money, but it is in the Power of every one alike to practise [sic] this Virtue” (515). Earning a profit is a virtuous endeavor, and “How to get RICHES” couples economic success with endorsements of austerity like thrift, money management, hard work, and education. In other writings, Franklin presents labor and frugality as a way to bolster the community, but “How to get RICHES” stresses the importance of self-reliance:

In things of moment, on thyself depend,
Nor trust too far thy servant or thy Friend:
With Private Views thy Friend may promise fair,
And servants very seldom prove sincere. (516)

Poor Richard advises his readers to focus on their own personal wealth development without depending on others. Instead of his characteristic aphorisms, Poor Richard’s remarks put the individual pursuit of profit in its social context. Economic drive and entrepreneurialism depend upon some aspect of self-serving independence, but ultimately, these energies must be redirected back into the service of the community. The potential for corruption emerges in a society of self-serving individuals, but Franklin does not dismiss the “definable human nature” that “dwells within consciousness, [which is] in an at least latently antagonistic relation with the rest of consciousness” (Breitwieser 7).
Individual human nature seeks to serve itself but in contrast to that is some antagonistic consciousness, invested in the greater good. Populationist theory depends upon the majority of the populace producing both resources and economic stability and focusing those acts on the public good, so it tries to resolve these intrapersonal antagonisms through making them extrapersonal. Even if one cannot trust his servant or friend, if his work seeks to support the public good, then it will ultimately, eventually generate both wealth and moral interdependence. As Franklin’s *belle lettres* connect the individual and the public good to economic wellbeing, these texts disseminate ideals about human nature that established the generative tenets of republicanism.

The populationist undertones of Franklin’s entrepreneurial and philanthropic efforts suggest the importance of the individual’s productivity to the public good and the American economy. When *Autobiography* is read as a populationist narrative, its economic models rearticulate the importance of growing demographic numbers and generating resource production. Franklin’s political allegiances shift over the course of his *Autobiography*, making it a measure of Franklin’s changing economic ideals (White 3-4). Scholars suggest that Franklin’s *Autobiography* “harmonize[s] [his] experiences” and “efface[s] his autobiographical self,” shifting rhetorical attention away from himself towards a sense of community with and among his readers (Arch 7). The *Autobiography* transmits Franklin’s expertise, where his “accounts and proverbs systematize knowledge to offer the reader a set of standards by which everyone can operate; they are for him the universalizing democratic principles at work in his text” (Rosha 39). This emphasis on the individual, as representative of the public’s power and credibility, furthers the patriotic rhetoric praising the self-made man’s desire to labor. However, the
Autobiography envisions success as a transferrable characteristic, shared through writings describing Franklin’s business models, franchises, and achievements. He describes these profit-earning ventures in relation to the community’s participation or support. The Autobiography’s community-centric undertones offer tangible business advice that goes beyond the individual to encourage the construction of incorporated franchises and perpetuating entrepreneurial models.

The Autobiography reminds readers of Franklin’s family’s immigration to the colonies, allowing his audience to connect with his story and to draw parallels between Franklin’s life and labor and their own. The narrative’s contrast between the professional opportunities available to his family in England and America and their pursuit of generative work in the colonies suggests Franklin’s personal understanding of the economic events that formed the basis for his populationist theory. He notes the professions of men in his family as that of blacksmith—“the eldest Son being always bred to that Business”—dyer, scrivener, and politician (Autobiography 568-72). These occupations are all non-agrarian, which may account for why the family had financial problems in early America. Franklin’s father changes his trade to “a Tallow Chandler and Sope-Boiler. A Business he was not bred to, but had assumed on his Arrival in New England and on finding his Dying Trade would not maintain his Family” (Autobiography 574). Nonetheless, this professional change did not help his father to “maintain his family” because Franklin must leave school at an early age when his father could not afford the expense of his education (Autobiography 573). These anecdotes challenge the myth that the American colonies were an economic utopia; they invoke the hardships that many experienced and a forewarning that immigration was not a guarantee of a better
life. In relating the story of his humble beginnings, Franklin provides context for his own success, yet the remainder of his *Autobiography* insists that his path can be emulated, even if the outcome is not quite as spectacular. The narrative’s focus manages expectations about the levels of revenue the colonists should expect from their generative labor.

The *Autobiography* endorses models of incorporation and franchise and adapts to new models of productivity, and in so doing, it demonstrates for readers the value of government-enabled commercialism and of large-scale business. Franklin grew his own businesses when he was “chosen in 1736 Clerk of the General Assembly… which secur’d to me the Business of Printing the votes, Paper Money, and other occasional Jobs for the public, that on the whole were very profitable” (*Autobiography* 663). The consolidation of early American political and financial spheres was essential to establishing the infrastructure for commercial and therefore republican growth. Franklin is chosen for government service and rewarded with personal profit. However, he focuses on the nature of the work itself—“the Business of Printing the votes [and] Paper Money”—as fulfilling a public service and a patriotic endeavor, and over the course of Franklin’s life, paper money and ballots came to represent the progressive economic and political values of a republican society. The colonial community benefits because Franklin’s printing company models entrepreneurial success and the benefits of corporate partnership. Similar to the evolution of the insurance industry in America, Franklin’s printing company’s government contracts expand entrepreneurship beyond self-sufficiency and towards a larger model of profit.
By modestly describing his printing business’s success, an achievement that he quickly multiplied and turned into independent franchises, Franklin’s entrepreneurialism becomes evidence, proof that personal gain can contribute to the public good. He explains, “[t]he Partnership at Carolina… succeeded, I was encourag’d to engage in others, and to promote several of my Workmen who had behaved well, by establishing them with Printing-Houses in different colonies on the same Terms with that in Carolina” (Autobiography 670). These shops are affiliated with Franklin’s original business yet managed by others, resembling contemporary franchise chain companies. These printing franchises did more than pad Franklin’s bank account; they disseminated models for expanding enterprise. This network of printing houses linked the colonies in entrepreneurial endeavors and enabled them to locally fulfill the needs of other businesses. In telling the story of his printing houses as a franchise model, Franklin removes the ethos of personal gain from his successes and emphasizes the ways American entrepreneurialism could connect the colonies as a community.

To combat the republican principles that portrayed individual accomplishments as corrosive to the public good, Franklin appeals to his readers’ pragmatism and presents them with moral lessons that describe the ways wealth can be redistributed and shared with society, once earned. When Franklin returns to writing Autobiography in 1784, he begins by recounting his frustration trying to raise support for a public library: “The Objections, & Reluctances I met with in Soliciting the Subscriptions, made me soon feel the Impropriety of presenting one’s self as the Proposer of any useful Project that might be suppos’d to raise one’s Reputation in the smallest degree above that of one’s Neighbors, when one has need of their Assistance to accomplish that Project”
(Autobiography 640-41). This anecdote reflects U.S. society after independence from England, and although Franklin’s library does not generate personal profit, it is a threat in the eyes of the community because it will bring renown to its benefactor. These concerns are contrary to the ideals of republicanism, which championed education to ensure that the populace would be knowledgeable and capable of being political agents. Instead of symbolizing the potential for education, the community sees the library as representative of an individual defining the communal good. Arguably, this reactions mimics the public’s worries about the turn towards commercialism; namely that any individual could potentially erode the common good in the spirit of pursuing economic wellbeing.

Franklin is superior and resentful; he is trying to improve his community’s access to educational materials, yet they are not receptive. Soon after relaying this story, Franklin focuses on the many ways an evolving commercial business culture serves the public, not just the individual.

Franklin believed in the formulaic perpetuity of easily replicated models, as exemplified in everything from his corporate projects like insurance or printing shop franchises to his strict daily routines. These repeatable structures encouraged consistency and progress, and they also emboldened the America’s population to reproduce already-proven entrepreneurial models. Franklin’s populationist theories valued the contribution of all those who labor productively, and his popular writings exemplify how he put his own revised economic principles into practice with his businesses. Franklin’s economic theories are persuasive, imaginative rhetoric and commercially viable products that the public purchased for their own benefit as well as that of communal economic wellbeing. Both Poor Richard’s Almanack and Autobiography are compelling, humorous texts that
freely break generic constructs, but the message conveyed to readers focuses on replication, repetition, and recreation. His texts endorse and become commodities, and by continuing to write in ways that foster the people’s investment in the idea that commerce was patriotic, he ensured that his works would have a perpetual audience.

***

“Pray Father Abraham, what think you of the Times? Won’t these heavy Taxes quite ruin the Country? How shall we ever able to pay them? What would you advise us to? . . . If you’d have my Advice, I’ll give it you in short, for a *Word to the Wise is enough, and many words won’t fill a Bushel, as Poor Richard says*” (Franklin, *Poor Richard’s Almanack* 555). Published in 1758, one of the final installments of *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, “Father Abraham’s Speech” or “The Way to Wealth,” detailed for the colonial public their responsibility to work in the face of the taxes imposed by the British. This tract was the most reprinted and translated of Franklin’s texts (Wood, *Americanization* 83-84). Father Abraham conveys this advice in the public market, which serves as a not so subtle allusion to the British regulation and exploitation of the American colonies’ commercial needs. Instead of addressing the taxes, Father Abraham persuades the colonists to focus on the actual work of growing America’s economy, on filling bushels. Filling bushels is the generative work that would serve to build the colonies’ economic good and the colonists’ moral character and would make their generative labor and the profits of that labor both invaluable to the British Empire and indicative of their own self-sufficiency.

When Franklin’s theory is presented as the rhetorical force that encouraged the mutually enabling dynamic between agrarianism and commercialism in America, then his works exemplify how the public adapted to and understood changing republican political
and economic ideals. Populationist theory was ultimately discarded; however, Franklin’s imaginative writings and nonfiction tracts prompt and continue conversations about the fiscal repercussions of slave labor, the known limits of land as a productive resource in America, and the problems of restricting an economy to one avenue of production. Franklin preserved and transformed his economic theory across his canon; although his arguments overestimated the potential of an agrarian America, his adaptations to populationist ideals suggest that he anticipated the demand for manufactures and commodities in a developing global economy.

When Franklin’s populationist theory is read alongside his nonfiction tracts and his belles lettres, it challenges the assumption that literature takes an interest in economic changes after they occur or that authors become invested in economic trends because of their own history. The tension between imaginative writing and economics is not simply fodder for plot. Instead, Franklin’s commitment to exploring labor, production, and profit as virtuous throughout his works demonstrates how texts that took up the themes of republicanism became complicit in advancing U.S. commercialism. By using popular writing to encourage the public’s participation in national political economy, Franklin demonstrated the ways literature could influence an audience and established the value and virtue of the text through its connection to the common good.

Works Cited


Alexander, Gregory S. Commodity and Propriety: Competing Visions of Property in


Gustafson, Sandra M. *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American*


Verhoeven, Wil. Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-
Vickers, Daniel. “Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America,”
*William and Mary Quarterly* 47.1 (1990) 3-29.


CHAPTER TWO

The Republican Citizen And The Republican Criminal:

Stephen Burroughs’s “Sophisticated Wickedness”

Let me tell the reader where he must put this book if he will please me and why there. On the same shelf with Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards (grandfather of Aaron Burr). Franklin will be a reminder of what we have been as a young nation in some respects, Edwards in others. Burroughs comes in reassuringly when there is question of our not unprincipled wickedness . . . But sophisticated wickedness, the kind that knows its grounds and can twinkle (Frost vii).

Despite Robert Frost’s appeal, the most avid readers of American literature may never encounter Stephen Burroughs or his memoirs. A lesser-known text in American literature, Burroughs’ Memoirs rehashes the life story of a criminal, con artist, and thoroughly unreliable and hypocritical narrator. The first edition of Burroughs’s Memoirs (1798) was published only eight years after Franklin’s The Autobiography, and Burroughs, like Franklin, uses his life story to narrate the common man’s struggles in the American republic and articulate his understanding of his place within the United States’ sociopolitical and economic spheres. The autobiography came into existence “in an age in which the notion of selfhood was under tremendous pressure, when new expectations were put upon some men and women (by society or by themselves) to shape and control their own destinies …and to participate in a tradition that had yet to coalesce” (Arch 21-22). Scholars often assume that autobiographies were meant to model proper citizenship and nation-building values but as Frost so poetically describes, there is a sophisticated
wickedness to Burroughs’s tale that is unexpected. The story that Burroughs, in his hypocrisy and wickedness, tells is pessimistic, exposing the ways the evolution of American capitalism intertwined with a change in republican values, ultimately serving to protect private interests and personal wealth over the individual citizen. Burroughs’s Memoirs reveals the seedy underbelly of the United States’ socioeconomic development, which is often covered over by patriotic rhetoric and republicanism’s optimistic belief in “the human propensity to improve society as people improve themselves” (Appleby 171). This story reveals the cognitive dissonance that existed between early America’s republican ideals and the U.S. legal system, and how these gaps enabled certain Americans to exploit the limited fiscal opportunities available in the young nation.

Citizenship and suffrage in the early American republican were privileges, initially given only to white, male landowners (Wilentz 27); yet, when citizenship is revoked and reinstated on the basis of criminal activity and incarceration, then the parameters of citizenship are further delineated and the rights associated with citizenship become legally solidified. Burroughs and his Memoirs serve as a necessary reminder of early America’s chaos and criminality, but the way his actions are policed also exposes the ways conflicting legal, economic, and personal interests manipulated the rhetoric of republicanism at the time. Some scholars of literature and history see Burroughs’s illegal acts as an expression of self-made manhood (Cohen 161; Little 207; Mihm 124; Williams 99). Where Burroughs may have been a hyperbolic expression of personhood, his delinquency is a counterforce to the U.S.’s developing institutions and power hierarchy (Fliegelman 245; Jones 33). Burroughs is able to capitalize on the opportunities for power and profit made available to white males via the ideals of early American republicanism,
and somewhat paradoxically, his manipulations are most obvious when he is in prison. Burroughs’ experiences in prison reveal the mutually enabling relationship between the republican myth of personal betterment\(^9\) and capitalism, showing this dynamic’s dependence upon America’s legal system. Burroughs is able to manipulate and benefit from the legal changes that called for the humanization of institutionalized punishment, and significantly, the prison was not the only institution that was forced to reconsider its status in relation to the republican individual in order to gain greater authority.

Concurrent to legislative measures seeking to reform the American prison, the U.S. Supreme Court used the rights of the American individual to “humanize” the difference between a public and private institution. The United States’ legal system was integral to optimizing national fiscal growth, and it utilized the rhetoric of protecting public interest to do so (Horwitz xvi). This litigious manipulation of the terms of the public good are best exemplified in the Supreme Court’s ruling on *Dartmouth v. Woodward* (1819) (Gregory 144-49). Chief Justice John Marshall’s comment on *Dartmouth v. Woodward* employs republican rhetoric to try to protect the American individual; however, this seminal case, also enabled private corporations to exploit their newfound legal designations as “American citizens,” which helped and continues to help businesses and companies side-step litigious oversight.

Burrougths’ sense of his own privilege as a republican citizen mirrors the republican rhetoric used in legal measures that enabled prison reform and corporate personhood in America. Prison reform’s rehabilitative approach to punishment was

---

\(^9\) Because a republican style of government “demanded an economic and social order that would encourage the shaping of a virtuous citizenry” (McCoy 7), its policy focused on bettering the individuals who comprised that society. Giving the public’s access to education was seen as the principle way to encourage them to build a personal moral system and deliberative ability, shaping them into a virtuous citizenry (Gustafson 37).
supposedly a representation of progressive governance (Smith 7), yet it also represents
the legal precedent for revoking citizen’s rights and for the forced, unpaid labor of
citizens. Burroughs’s description of his time in prison exemplifies the ways an individual
could manipulate republican ideals for his own benefit and transform others into workers,
who toil away for his gain. When this rhetoric is compared to the *Dartmouth v.
Woodward* ruling that provided private corporations with the same rights as the private
citizen, it reveals how the humanization of American institutions emboldened a certain
class of citizens and certain industries while disenfranchising and leaving others
vulnerable.

**The Characteristic Citizen: Burroughs and Republicanism**

Burroughs’s *Memoirs* is an episodic text that has been characterized as a
picaresque, a crime novel, and an autobiography (Cohen 156; Little 207; Arch 124-25).
However, in contrast to the precepts of these generic forms, Burroughs does not conclude
his tale with a clean epiphany nor does he repent his actions. His motives are flimsy, and
while initially he appears as a bored, young man seeking adventure, as his crimes
escalate, he acquires more power and profit. Burroughs presents himself as the American
common man, yet over the course of his *Memoirs*, Burroughs abandons this persona and
adopts new ones, depending on what benefits him. By linking Burroughs’s identity
manipulations with their profitable outcomes, then these purposeful falsifications come to
signify how lucrative the republic myth of personal betterment could be. Burroughs
closes the first edition of his *Memoirs* with the story of his successful escape from his
second incarceration, and he publishes a second edition to continue his story, adding
charges of additional rapes, debt, and land speculation to his already long saga of criminal activities. Burroughs suggests that he publishes this second edition due to financial hardship thereby positing the idea that the first edition was profitable enough to make him optimistic that the second would also sell. Alongside these criminal acts, Burroughs also tries his hand at legal ways of making money. Eventually, Burroughs ends up in Canada where his story takes an interesting twist: Burroughs converts to Catholicism and becomes a revered as a philanthropic Saint in Canadian history while maintaining his criminal notoriety in the United States (Little 230). Burroughs’ ability to profit even with his criminal history reveals the consequences of republican idealism: namely, the ways republicanism’s seemingly inclusive and open-ended definition of the value of individual labor made the actual worth of production mutable and exploitable.

Critical approaches to *Memoirs* differ in terms of whether they understand Burroughs as an example of an early American self-made man with self-serving drive or as an example of republicanism’s permeability and malleability. Historian J.I. Little sees Burroughs as a representation of the power of the liberal individual’s access to authority and economic success (207). Similarly, literary scholars, like Stephen Arch, Jay Fliegelman, and Stephen Mihm see Burroughs as dismantling a social order that predates the U.S. and his self-fashioning as embracing democracy while also disrupting its egalitarian conceits (114-15; 245-46; 124). Most recently, Peter Jaros argues, on the basis of Burroughs’s theatricality, that he is a “public specter” or that Burroughs “is not...
easily accounted for by the paradigms on which early Americanists have generally relied: the possessive liberal individual, the republican citizen, or the excluded other” (571-72). Where others readings focus on Burroughs’s as either fitting into or disrupting the rhetoric of liberalism, Jaros highlights how his many personas make him a representation of all segments of the American populace or of those who republicanism could and could not contain. And, arguably, Burroughs’ narrative is so important because it illustrates the ways the public sphere and private institutions intersect, especially under the jurisdiction of the law. *Memoirs* presents the triangulation between the public sphere, the private institutions, and the individual, and in so doing, it exposes the hidden layer of exploitation that is fueled by the ideals of American republicanism.

Burroughs, who represents the privilege of the white male in early American society and the moral depravity of the criminal, is also illustrative of the populace’s understanding of republican values and also, the extent to which these ideals could be exploited for personal gain. Burroughs uses *Memoirs* to share his views on how the American government and people should act and react to one another, and he reiterates the ideals of republicanism as beneficial for the nation as a whole. He presents these ideas to his reader as if he is an outsider, trying to share observational wisdom, and his musings are initially very persuasive (Arch 124). For example, Burroughs believes Americans “ought to” behave in a certain way to model appropriate citizenship for the next

---

11 Where republicanism was supposed to be representative of public interest, it was also easily transformed into a tool for the moneyed interests of the upper class (Wood 47; Mercieca 21). In the first years of the American republic, voting rights were only granted to white, male landowners; in other words, the right to have one’s opinion heard and represented by the government was based upon one’s financial ability to own property and to participate in the national economy (Wilentz 8, 27-28). These values quickly changed to privilege commerce once trade became integral to the U.S. economy; mercantilism became virtuous because it engendered relationships amongst American citizens as networks across the country (Pocock 48-49). As U.S. republican values expanded and adapted to new economic forms, they became susceptible to manipulation and to the tenuous argument that all productive labor or profit making was virtuous.
generation: “Our commands, in the first place, ought to be reasonable, humane, and parental, calculated to promote, not only the good of the subject of our government, but likewise embracing for their object, the benefit of the whole community . . . By such a practice we make good subjects, good legislators, and good executors” (8). A reminder of the rhetoric that substantiated the public’s investment in the American republic, Burroughs explores the lofty ideals that were supposed to enable the public and the government to balance one another’s power. The people must make reasonable demands of the legislature, and the government must make requests that account for the whole of society. If each faction of society follows these ideals, then the precedent will be set for generations to come. Burroughs asserts that the government exists for “the benefit of the whole community” thereby showing that it is not simply the people’s patriotic duty to consider how their actions can contribute to the greater good of society. This exploration of the ideal relationship between the American populace and its figures of authority concludes the first chapter of Burroughs’s story, and although Burroughs refers to this address as a “digression” from his narrative, its focus maps out how the conflicts Burroughs has with his government and his community are, at least in his mind, justifiable.

Burroughs’s perception of his own social position and place within the American republic is illustrated by those he analogizes himself to, and he frequently compares himself to the farmers who fought against the Massachusetts government in protest of an increase in their taxes. By pointing out that a man who fought against the farmers in Shays rebellion also persecuted him, Burroughs aligns his struggles against authority and his quest for economic self-sufficiency with that of the American farmer (193). Shays’
Rebellion in 1786 exemplifies the ways the economic and political ideals of early American republicanism were exploited by personal, economic interest. After the war for American independence, members of the Massachusetts military, which was comprised of poor farmers, were paid in paper money, and in dire need of money, these men sold the notes, some for as little as a tenth of their value. Speculators redeemed the paper money, there by placing a heavy burden on the state’s fiscal resources and causing the legislature to raise property taxes on very farmers who had sold the notes for below market value. In response to these taxes, Daniel Shays and other Massachusetts farmers attacked a federal arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts, throwing the rhetoric of the Revolution in the face of their newly elected representatives. This rebellion marks the moment when powerful in America realized the potential for another Revolution and in response, consolidated their power behind a stronger, national government (Germana 13). Shays’ Rebellion actually set a trend where “subsistence culture [repeatedly] answered taxes with violence” (Sellers 73). For these early Americans, who sensed the emptiness behind the patriotic rhetoric of republicanism, protecting their profits and protecting their means of subsistence was worth fighting their own government. Shays’ Rebellion highlights the growing hypocrisy of America’s republican values as well as the public’s seeming lack of understanding of how institutional authority encroached on their rights. Burroughs claims he has been persecuted in the same way that Shays’ farmers were, and while his assertion is hyperbolic, it reveals his understanding of republicanism’s promises and the ways in which this rhetoric could be exploited.

The economic interests shared by the government, the community, and the individual was supposed to be a novel feature of early America’s republican political
system (Baker 5). Much like the mythic ideal that the United States was a mecca of economic opportunity, the foundation for republican economic solidarity was also built upon patriotic rhetoric that obscured problems like debt and financial dependency with praise for a mutually supportive economic collective (Baker 3). The belief that labor is a virtuous, patriotic act was an integral component of the republican agenda, and Burroughs highlights this idea as he presents three “points” that are necessary to “the good of society”:

1st. To obtain what is necessary to supply the calls of nature, by the least painful measures. 2d. Rules for the regulation of mankind, in their relative situation, which, in their operation, will tend to harmonize the conduct of the whole towards individuals. 3d. A supply of food for the mental part of creation; for the mental part requires a certain supply, in order to render us sensibly happy, as well as the corporeal. Mankind, in their present state of existence, finds it necessary to submit to the pain of labor (31).

Similar to Franklin’s hypothesis in “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” Burroughs asserts that in order to be happy, mankind must have their basic-level subsistence needs met and meeting those survival needs must be guaranteed so that the “mental part of creation” can occur and society can evolve. These points reflect the realities of a subsistence-level agrarian economy: farmers labor to provide the necessary resources for themselves and their families; laws and regulations function to ensure a harmonious environment for this work; and finally, by producing the goods necessary for survival, mankind enables its own intellectual development. In Burroughs’s vision, labor appears as requisite for mankind’s current state of being and to preserve social
equilibrium. However, Burroughs’ fantastical thinking is on display here; he can imagine a future where the “pain of labor” might not be essential, yet he does not reconcile this desire not to work with his understanding of “what is necessary to supply the calls of nature.” In short, his recognition of the value of work does not supersede his desire to manipulate such ideals and avoid it.

Burroughs constantly reiterates his desire to work, and in so doing, he paints himself as a common American man, the typical liberal individual struggling to sustain himself and his family. But, Burroughs and his family are not the average post-revolutionary Americans. He is given the opportunity to attend Dartmouth for college, and where this education could have led to a career, he rejects it because he does not see the value of academic training. Upon leaving college, Burroughs states: “It is a melancholy consideration that our youth should spend so much time in acquiring that knowledge, which is of no use to themselves or to the community, of which they are members… I contend, that the person who has learned to make a shoe, does more good to society than he who has spent seven years in acquiring a knowledge of dead languages” (30-31). Burroughs lauds the work of skilled craftsmen by praising the usefulness of the work and its ability to fulfill a social need, and he chastises knowledge that does not contribute to meeting the American populace’s subsistence requirements. This contrast between types of knowledge and the value of work is a way for Burroughs to align his definitions of productive and nonproductive labor with those who physically labor to generate goods and resources; however, he is also conveniently reframing his choice to leave Dartmouth by suggesting that his decision is altruistic. For a master rhetorician like Burroughs, this is exactly the narrative he needs to draw similarities between himself and
the majority of America, to highlight his plight earning a sustainable living in the United States and to justify his criminal behavior.

Hypocritically, Burroughs celebrates the noble republican principles that praise productive labor and the individual’s work as a contribution to the good of society, yet his own attempts to work are half-hearted and typically illegal. In contrast to his protestations that he “does not want to remain an inactive member of society” (30), Burroughs has trouble settling into a profession, mostly because, after leaving Dartmouth, he does not have the education he needs to perform the jobs he would like:

The practice of Law… I could not undertake, until I had spent some time in the study, which would be attended with expense far beyond my abilities… Physic was under the same embarrassments: business of the mercantile line, I could not pursue for want of capital; and even a school, at this time of the year, was hardly to be obtained. Business of some kind I must enter into, and that immediately, in order to answer the present calls of nature. And what can that be? Said I; have not I enumerated all the callings, which are profitable for me to attend to? (47-48).

What will contribute to the good of society is no longer on the forefront of Burroughs’s mind; he sacrifices patriotic ideals for the pursuit of profit. Law, physical sciences, mercantile business, and teaching are the professions that Burroughs considers because they are “all the callings, which are profitable” and notably, farming or other forms of labor that would lead to the United States producing resources for national self-sufficiency are not mentioned. Even though Burroughs seemingly believes in the ideals of republicanism and utilitarian labor, he is keenly aware of the difference in financial
reward between skilled labor and educated labor and does not actively represent the rhetoric he repeats. If Burroughs is the common man, then his struggles for wealth come to signify the limits of economic opportunity in the American republic. However, if he represents a member of the elite class who is simply endorsing republican labor values for other Americans, then his rhetoric exposes how the patriotic sheen cast over production and self-sufficiency facilitated the exploitation of the laborer in the service of furthering economic development and political stability.

In contrast to the ways Burroughs rewrites his identity and aligns his woes with a larger collective of men disenfranchised by republicanism, he often takes advantage of others or points the finger at them to disperse blame for his actions. When caught impersonating a preacher and giving sermons he stole from his father, Burroughs explains away his crimes to his reader by stating, “That I have aimed at nothing but a bare supply of the necessaries of life, is a fact. That I have never, in one instance, taken advantage of that confidence which the people of Pelham entertained toward me, to injure them and benefit myself, is a truth acknowledged by all. Under these circumstances, whether I ought to bear the name of imposture, according to the common acceptation, is the question?” (67). Burroughs’s need for basic sustenance is apparently the driving force behind his criminal activity, and through making this claim, his deception is minimized and he calls into question the charges being levied against him. It is true that the citizens of Pelham paid him to preach twenty Sabbath sermons, and he came close to fulfilling that obligation before he was run out of town. Although Burroughs asserts that he ought not to “bear the name of imposture” because he did meet the terms of his contract, he was able to successfully impersonate a preacher and give these sermons because of his family
background. Without his father’s sermons and his understanding of a preacher’s habit, persona, and mannerisms, Burroughs would not have been able to replicate the work of a preacher (53-54). Rather than capitalize on the educational opportunities given to him, Burroughs chooses to capitalize on replication; he produces illicit legitimacy for profit. This separation of labor from legitimacy is a trend in Burroughs’s criminal activity, disassociating the criminal individual from the proceeds of his actions.

Burroughs’s crimes are not limited to performed identity types; he also attempts to produce wealth out of invaluable means, alchemy and counterfeiting. These crimes are representative of more than Burroughs’s desire to get rich quick; they signify how knowledge of wealth production and economic practices can be used to manipulate and exploit those who do not understand them. In 1690, the Massachusetts legislature was the first political body in the western world to adopt paper money for its currency (Baker 6). While the transition from hard currency to its paper counterpart is understood to be a symbol of progress and economic evolution today, Shay’s rebellion is only one example of how hesitant the American public was to accept this change. Although initially skeptical, Burroughs is tempted by the allure of hard currency through a metallurgy scheme that transforms copper into silver. Describing his hesitation, Burroughs states, “I agreed to attend Lysander on a visit to this wonderful transmuter of metals, and there examine his experiments, until we had reduced the matter to a certainty” (60). This plot depends on the mutability of a metal’s identity while its value remains immutable; it first depends upon Burroughs’s doubt reducing and transforming into certainty. Burroughs is eventually convinced he has discovered the secret to “becoming the richest man on the continent of America” (61-62). However, this scheme only proves to be lucrative for the
man who devised it, and Burroughs, along with thirty other men, is deceived and loses his money (78). On the surface, this is a convenient tale for Burroughs to tell, it aligns him with others, like the Shaysites, who may have been cheated trying to invest or transform their savings into a profit. Yet, accounting for Burroughs’s sense of entitlement and his belief that he has properly investigated the scheme exposes his hubris and greed as well as his own desire to manipulate the American economy.

One of the ways in which a republic was supposed to allow Americans to be productive members of a national economy was by giving equitable access to financial tools—namely, currency (Appleby 115). Paper currency was controversial because, on the one hand, it was more available to the populace than currency represented by gold or silver; however, on the other hand, paper currency was vulnerable to counterfeit and susceptible to changes in its value. Burroughs grasps the concept of paper money as a value abstraction and how to profit from it: “Money, of itself, is of no consequence, only as we, by mutual agreement, annex to it a nominal value as the representation of property. Anything else might answer the same purpose, equally with silver and gold, should mankind only agree to consider it as such, and carry that agreement into execution in their dealings with each other” (83). In his understanding of money’s extrinsic value, Burroughs asserts that paper currency is, in itself, “of no consequence,” and he comprehends the ways fiscal systems evolve to diminish the value of exchangeable property and to elevate the worth of intangible representations of wealth. This contrast between property and specie-backed currency mirrors the discrepancies between the types of wealth endorsed by the myth of republican agrarianism and those enjoyed by the American elite. This precise explanation of the socioeconomic transition from propertied
to abstract wealth reveals Burroughs’s erudite recognition of how these phases could be manipulated. Burroughs receives his first jail sentence for his participation in a monetary counterfeiting scheme (80). In a moment of questionable veracity, Burroughs states that he is unable to convince his friend Lysander of the flaws in his counterfeiting scheme and instead, Burroughs attempts to pass the fake notes and is held accountable for the crime.

*Memoirs* tracks Burroughs’s ability to turn a profit alongside the nation’s shift in focus from the republican public to its protection of private interests and capital gains. Burroughs uses his fortitude and his sensibility to pursue illegal activities, and in so doing, he violates the idealized vision of the republican individual who values his labor as an independent, patriotic act that benefits the nation. Republicanism was supposed to represent public interest; however, it was quickly transformed into a tool for the moneyed interests of the upper class. Although Burroughs was born into early America’s educated, professional class, his narrative conveniently analogizes his struggles with those of the American common man. And, whenever inconvenient, he abandons this persona for new ones that allow him to cheat and steal at the expense of the working class. Linking Burroughs’s identity manipulations with their profitable outcomes transforms these falsifications into examples of how valuable the undefined terms of the republic myth could be for privileged, white males. And, Burroughs’s ability to reassert his rights as a citizen, even when said rights have been revoked, shows how easily republican ideals could be manipulated, especially by those who were supposed to be exempt from their privileges.
The Criminal Citizen: The Prison and the Breakdown of Human Rights

One of the ways in which republicanism governance was supposed to connect the general populace to the nation’s political structures was through making power and authority more accessible and more humane (Wilentz 9-10). The ideals and realities of this shift can be witnessed in the American government’s assumption of control over the U.S. prison system. Simultaneous to the evolution of the United States’ representative government was “the birth of an organized prison system . . . It was actually in the first year of American independence, 1776, that an early act of the newly-formed State of Pennsylvania provided in its constitution, that the Legislature ‘proceed, as soon as might be, to the reform of the penal laws, and invent punishments less sanguinary, and better proportioned . . .’” (Lewis 8). The prison was an arm of the government and entrusted to reform subjects using “less sanguinary” and “better-proportioned” means that would protect the public good by rehabilitating wayward citizens. American judges began to “use the law in order to encourage social change” as the country, from 1780 until 1820, transitioned away from the legal statutes and precedents established by British rule (Horwitz 4). This shift is evident in the ways that the prison was empowered to rehabilitate the prisoner into a valuable, productive member of a republican society. The prison is a public institution because it receives its power from public officials and is designed to serve the public. However, in order to encourage economic change, U.S. state governments passed laws granting corporate charters and franchises, sanctioning private entrepreneurial ventures in the same way they were also authorizing for public institutions. In 1780, there were seven business corporations granted charters by colonial legislatures, and over the course of the next twenty years, that number grew
exponentially, with over three hundred additional charters granted by the government at the turn of the nineteenth century (Horwitz 109-12). Although private institutions and eventually corporations are ultimately defined by their private pursuit of individual profit, U.S. political structures endorsed and empowered corporate, commercial activity as they did public institutions.

Criminal rehabilitation reflects republicanism’s focus on the populace; the treatment of prisoners was seen as a measure of government enlightenment and as “a theater for the performance of its society’s founding political myths” (Smith 7). The prison is a paradoxical institution because in withholding an individual’s rights on the basis of wrongdoing, it helps to define the privileges of citizenship. Prison reform tactics simultaneously depend upon the belief that the prisoner, as a human being, has the psychological capability to change his or her behavior; however, the prison’s very nature is defined by its institutional prerogative to remove the rights and privileges that define the prisoner as a human citizen according to United States law (Smith 6). Moreover, as the American legal system established precedent about the punishment of criminal behavior via “municipal regulations, state statutes, court decisions, and constitutional conventions combined, . . . [it] offers a composite sketch of a normative American citizen characterized by his whiteness and masculinity. [And] the comparatively full range of political rights accorded the white, male citizen [came] to represent an important aspirational ideal” (DeLombard 53). Prison reform empowered the institution to define human virtue and to create the ideal citizen subject, ideals that were based upon the rights

---

12 The American turn towards commercial capitalism and privately held incorporated companies is a story that is typically told through business history (Marx 15-19; Trachtenberg 3-4; Chandler 13). This focus highlights the role the railroad played in linking the nation’s resource producers with its manufacturers and how the emancipation of an African American labor force and an influx of immigrants fulfilled the nation’s need for cheap, unskilled workers.
and privileges afforded to white male citizens. The white male citizen, who had the most access to rights in the young republic, became typified as the pinnacle of power and his rights epitomized the freedoms and liberties promised to prisoners upon their release.

Burroughs is incarcerated in both solitary confinement and hard labor prisons, and these systems represented two innovative approaches to penal reform, where rather than publicly punishing criminals, nations attempted to rehabilitate their wayward citizens. The U.S. comparatively tested the efficacy of two approaches to rehabilitation: the Pennsylvania System and the New York or Auburn System, solitary confinement and hard labor prisons, respectively (Smith 10). Although Burroughs’s *Memoirs* predated the construction of Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and the Auburn Prison in New York by twenty years, his *Memoirs* were published two years after one of the earliest proponents of American prison reform took up the cause. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a sort of early American Renaissance man, is known for his prison reform efforts as well as signing the Declaration of Independence, fighting Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemics in the 1790s, and writing on various subjects, like Native American medicine, the moral faculty, and psychological disorder (Madden 242-46). In his 1787 “An Enquiry in the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals and upon Society,” Rush advocates for an end to public spectacles of punishment and for a systemic approach to criminal rehabilitation. At a gathering of “The Society for Promoting Political Inquiries”, held at Benjamin Franklin’s house, Rush asserted: “all public punishments tend to make bad men worse, and to encrease [sic] crimes by their influence on society” (5). Criminal activity and the way it is punished is a societal problem, and Rush reminds the more elite members of American society of corporeal punishment’s impact on the community, not
just the individual. So, humanizing punishment a matter of interest to the public good, and those who must adapt to the humane treatment of criminals can anticipate that there will be benefits for them in the process.

Prison reform, for Rush, entailed rehabilitating America’s criminals into productive and self-sufficient subjects who were able to return to society; labor became an important component of reform because it remade the prisoner into a member of the working class. Therefore, Rush advocated for: “punishments [that] should consist of bodily pain, labor, watchfulness, solitude, and silence. They should all be joined with cleanliness and a simple diet” (12). If corporal punishment is removed from this list, then Rush’s prescription for the rehabilitation of prisoners begins to resemble the scheduled, model for daily life prescribed by Franklin in *The Autobiography*. Rush’s vision for prisoner rehabilitation also includes, “labor [that is] regulated and directed, as to be profitable to the state. Besides employing criminals in laborious and useful manufactures, they may be compelled to derive all their subsistence from a farm and a garden, cultivated by their own hands” (12). A self-sufficient and productive prison would teach its inmates the value of economic autonomy and skills that would enable prisoners to become productive members of society upon their release. On the surface, Rush’s plan appears focused on making prisons self-sustaining and economically profitable, the types of work that Rush champions align with the types of labor that were a part of the rhetoric linking republican individualism to American economics. Rush’s agenda for penal reform is based on the ideal that the convict could be “resurrected as a citizen” (Smith 28-29). However, when Rush’s agenda is read alongside its historical context—namely that citizenship was a privilege only extended to a small margin of the populace—then his
model for correcting wayward Americans’ behavior becomes a project in conformity. Conformity that, in turn, would benefit those who needed workers socialized to labor without complaint.

Notwithstanding the potential profit that could come from prison labor, Rush remains cautious about how visible prison labor might impact the symbolic value of work. If work is associated with criminal baseness then it might discourage those who are not incarcerated from working, or so Rush argues,

It is a well-known fact, that white men soon decline labor in the West Indies, and in the southern states, only because the agriculture, and mechanical employments of these countries, are carried on chiefly by Negro slaves. But I object further to the employment of criminals on the high-ways and streets, from the idleness they will create by alluring spectators from their business: and thereby depriving the state of greater benefits from the industry of its citizens, than it can ever derive from the public labor of criminals (9).

Comparable to slave labor, the prisoner cannot reap the rewards of his or her toil, so the state, in controlling the penitentiary, must balance the cost of the penal system with concerns about how the populace will interpret the benefits of this labor. Rush’s worries seem disproportionate; did it really seem possible that the early America’s incarcerated criminals could produce as much profit as the vast numbers of enslaved Africans? Or that criminal labor would be so prevalent as to dissuade Americans working? Rush articulates the fears of the United States’ elite citizens regarding the ways in which the nation’s economic health was dependent upon the laboring populace’s commitment to work.
Rush’s worries represent a flawed causal argument: given the problems plaguing early America’s economy, his focus on the working class is a telling reminder of how the men sitting in Franklin’s salon understood the significance of mythologizing republicanism. Namely, that the ideals of citizenship and patriotism could be evacuated of their connection to the individual and applied to the public good so long as it stood to benefit the nation’s bottom line.

Solitary confinement prisons were supposed to rehabilitate the individual prisoner by encouraging him to reflect on his crimes and realize the error of his ways. As Burroughs tells the story of his own confinement, and he shows the flaws of this kind of moral reform:

I was confined in a room on the ground floor alone, and shut out from the possibility of seeing any company… I reflected on my imprudence at the time of trial, on the desperate voyage I had undertaken for the sake of befriending others; on the consummate folly in our plans for wealth; and upon the three years’ siege I must now undertake against the walls of a prison (102).

Burroughs meditates on issues peripheral to his actual crime: how he acted during the trial, his friendships, and his ill-conceived schemes, so rather than emerging from confinement remorseful for his crime, Burroughs uses the time to make plans for more illegal activity—escape. When taken at his word, Burroughs’s superficial meditations expose the flaws of prison reform. Even though these ruminations expose how Burroughs values his status as a citizen and reveals the rights that he feels should be inalienable, he is seemingly unable to make a connection between the loss of those rights and his own
actions. Yet these conclusions all come from taking Burroughs at his word. Burroughs’s predilection for retelling his history in a self-serving manner calls into question his complaints about prison life, especially as his protests become hyperbolic.

Burroughs uses every symbol and bit of patriotic rhetoric from the American Revolution and the early republic to make self-serving arguments, yet he frames these assertions as a sort of protest for the people. The revolutionaries’ quest for liberty becomes a rallying cry for the unlawfulness of his imprisonment; “it has been abundantly said by the leading men in this state, that life without liberty is not worth the possessing. This was abundantly urged to the people in time of the war; and it was urged with great truth and propriety” (Burroughs 98). Burroughs shifts from condemning the empty promises of the Revolution and critiquing the ideals of prison reform. Although mentions of slavery or slaves do not appear frequently in *Memoirs*, Burroughs does analogize his imprisonment to slavery or discuss slavery while imprisoned on six occasions. To suggest the inhumanity or barbarity of his imprisonment, Burroughs argues: “the same characters upon a revision of the criminal code, with a pretense of mollifying those laws which with sanguinary and cruel should substitute slavery with death, is to me, conduct truly enigmatical (98). Burroughs condemns “the leading men in this state,” who encouraged America’s rebellion by idealizing liberty, and highlights the discrepancies between those who crafted the republican myth and those who needed to believe it in order for it to succeed. Within this critique of the U.S.’s power disparities, Burroughs also implicates “the leading men” in the project of prison reform, so it is clear that he knew about efforts like Rush’s to transform the penal system and punishment. However, in comparing imprisonment to slavery and death, Burroughs is by no means making a plea for liberty
for enslaved African Americans or equating their lack of rights to civic death. Instead, he utilizes the rhetoric of the revolution and the colonists’ disenfranchisement under British rule, suggesting that he should be free to enjoy the liberties enjoyed by American citizens because they exist. Burroughs begins by making an appeal on behalf of the common man and concludes by appealing to the very republican values that enable the stratification he initially rejects.

Having considered the ways that the individual citizen can manipulate the rhetoric and ideals of republicanism in the service of personal gain; it is also integral to consider the ways public and private institutions could also exploit or manipulate those values. The economic changes shifting the United States sociopolitical values were often rooted in privileges bestowed by the legislature, but the responsibility for interpreting the issues that arose out of them and for enforcing their merits fell to the American courts (Horwitz 3). The 1819 *Dartmouth v. Woodward* case had little to do with corporate personhood and everything to do with academic egos, yet this case remains pertinent today as legal precedent that emboldened private corporations with rights that are equitable to those of an individual citizen. Dartmouth College’s Board of Trustees and the College President, John Wheelock, turned a disagreement over who would serve as Pastor of the Hanover Church into a political power struggle (North 182-84). This battle reached its height of contention when the Dartmouth Trustees began rejecting Wheelock’s professorial appointments. When the Federalist trustees voted to remove Wheelock from office, Wheelock became a martyr and his ousting became a part of the New Hampshire Democrats’ platform (North 191-94). In the 1816 election, the majority of the states, including New Hampshire, ushered out their Federalist leaders. New Hampshire’s newly
elected Democratic governor, William Plumer, declared in his inaugural address: “There is no system of government where the general diffusion of knowledge is so necessary as in a republic.” And, he continues, “The College was formed for the public good, not for the benefit or emolument of its trustees; and the right to amend and improve acts of incorporation of this nature has been exercised by all governments, both monarchical and republican” (North 201-02). Education is foundational cornerstone of republican philosophy (Gustafson 37-39), and by considering education a part of the public good, Plumer decreed that Dartmouth was a public institution that is beholden to and arbitrated by the public. This link between an incorporated entity and the public good becomes the justification for the New Hampshire government’s new trustee appointments to Dartmouth’s board. Not surprisingly, Dartmouth’s original board of trustees refused to recognize the legality of the new board’s proceedings, and a string of court cases ensued that led to an appearance in front of the Supreme Court (North 203).

*Dartmouth v. Woodward* became a symbolic case: it questioned the government’s role in regulating private institutions and if, like a prison, the government could assume control over or remove the rights of other bodies, in this case institutional bodies. John Marshall’s Supreme Court ruled in favor of Dartmouth’s board of trustees on the basis that: “in these private eleemosynary institutions, the body corporate, as possessing the whole legal and equitable interest, and completely representing the donors, for the purpose of executing the trust, has rights which are protected by the constitution” (654). The public and private institution are distinguished by their purpose: if operating for the benefit of its own interests, then a private institution has rights that are protected by the constitution, similar to how the law safeguards the interests of private citizens. In
contrast, Marshall explains the legislature’s relationship to the public corporation as a contract in which: “those laws concerning civil institutions, which must change with circumstances, and be modified by ordinary legislation; which deeply concern the public, and which, to preserve good government, the public judgment must control” (627).

According to this ruling, the public institution is at the mercy of the circumstances that change or impel political legislation, and Marshall imagines that this would obligate these institutions to change and adapt to the will of the public and their voting decisions. Therefore, the public institution—for example the prison—is defined both in relation to its purpose and the populace’s demands as enacted by the legislature, and the private corporation is freed from answering to the legislature because of its function.

The Supreme Court case of Dartmouth v. Woodward presents another point of entry for understanding the way the American corporation and private institutions developed almost amorphously and to usurp the rights of the individual citizen. Marshall saw the Dartmouth v. Woodward ruling as creating a necessary distinction between the rights of the person and the rights of the corporation; however, because Dartmouth v. Woodward conferred artificial personhood status upon the corporation, it became easy for the courts to conflate actual personhood rights to the supposedly artificial being (Gregory 1449-50). The ruling exposes a distinction in how personhood and personal rights were altered to accommodate the corporate form. In his comment, Marshall states:

A corporation is an artificial being, invisible, intangible, and existing only in contemplation of law. Being the mere creature of law, it possesses only those properties which the charter of its creation confers upon it, either expressly, or as incidental to its very existence. … Among the most
important are *immortality*, and, if the expression may be allowed, *individuality*; properties, by which a perpetual succession of many persons are considered as the same, and may act as the single individual (636).

The composed yet incomprehensible character of the corporation only exists “in contemplation of law” with the expressed purpose of immortality that was independent of individual members tells a different narrative. *Dartmouth v. Woodward* established that a public corporation required a grant of political power, yet this did not transform the public corporation’s property or its use of public property into property held by the public. In contrast, the private corporation’s status as an “artificial being” should have limited its rights because where it was a public good for the individual to possess property, a private corporation was restricted to objects of use as property. However, American courts began to subtly conflate “artificial” persons with actual persons and these associations extended the legal protections offered to the individual to the corporate body, so this distinction, designed to preserve the rights of the working and productive American actually served to enable the corporation’s growth and to naturalize its presence in a nation that prized autonomy, self-sufficiency, and individual liberty (Gregory 1449-50). When the legal status of the corporation, both public and private, was particularized to possess the characteristics of the individual, it reveals how malleable republican values were.

Although Marshall believed that the *Dartmouth v. Woodward* ruling was designed to protect the rights of the individual by distinguishing them from those of the corporation, this ruling actually enabled the expansion of the corporate system. *Dartmouth v. Woodward* solidified and protected the rights of a private corporation and
transformed “the corporate form [into] an individual’s natural tool, as useful a device for independence and growth as a farmer’s plow” (Gregory 1454). The corporation had to be transformed; it had to become a means of production that could be revered and idealized by the populace in similar manner to how agrarian labor was idealized. Even though the corporate form represents a collectivization of individual laboring bodies, the language used to describe its value required the same idealistic logic as the patriotic, republican rhetoric that once encouraged agrarian resource production and transfers the symbolic value of work across types of labor. *Dartmouth v. Woodward* reveals both the precedent for the personification of the business corporation in the eyes of American law and also the precedent for the corporation’s exploitation of the laboring body through the guise of patriotism. And, where infringing on the rhetoric of the republican individual does not necessarily mean that the corporation gains rights at the detriment of the individual, it does highlight how the legal existence of the American corporation was defined both in relation to and in opposition to the American individual.

The legal empowerment of the American prison as an institution occurred previous to *Dartmouth v. Woodward* and the legalized corporate appropriation of individual rights. Burroughs’s *Memoirs* offers two key ways to understand how the legal system enabled this parasitic power dynamic between the American institution and the individual. First, the rights that Burroughs laments losing while in prison occurred simultaneous to the social push for humanizing the prison. When Burroughs’s complaints are paired with the way the prison restricts and idealizes the privileges promised by republicanism, it reveals how the institution is legally able to define and enable citizen rights. And second, focusing on the moments when Burroughs is able to invert the power
structure of the prison shows the potential consequences to humanizing institutions. Rather than succumb to the conforming process of rehabilitation, Burroughs assumes power and is able to force the prison to restructure itself for him. When the history of the American corporation is interpreted through the lens of the individual rather than that of industry, it tells the story of those who were able to profit from these new economic forms and of those who were exploited by them.

In this vein, Burroughs’s *Memoirs* becomes an important literary predecessor to *Dartmouth v. Woodward*—arguably a point of origin for America’s modern industrial-mercantile economy—precisely because of the author’s time in prison. The penitentiary is a public institution, yet it also functions as a commercial space, even when it is not a forced labor institution. Burroughs’s trial and subsequent incarceration reveal that the prisoner was expected to pay for his legal representation, room and board in prison, meals, and clothing (95). While imprisoned, Burroughs transitions from deploring his inability to function as an economic, liberal individual to unsuccessfully protesting his own dehumanization in the factory-like work environment. Initially, Burroughs is placed in Northampton, a solitary confinement prison, and his deficient personal funds prevent him from living beyond the state’s meager provisions. Burroughs turns to ideals of republicanism and the connection between labor and patriotism to lament his situation: “Shut from the enjoyment of society, from performing a part among the rest of the my fellow mortals, to make some establishment for myself, in this state of dependence; and from tasting the sweets of liberty, for which we had so lately found and bled” (98). Unable to “perform a part” in society or to “make some establishment” for himself, Burroughs’s main complaint is being unproductive and unable earn money. The prison
system prevents Burroughs from earning a profit, yet it also directly links his survival to his ability to independently fund his internment. Burroughs idealizes the ability to work along with the rights and liberties that the Americans won in the recent Revolution, and he suggests that the prison system violates the aspirational ideals of republicanism. However, looking at the way that Burroughs is able to profit or gain favor even when his rights are revoked offers insight into how an institution based on elevating the ideals of white, male privilege can be manipulated by a white, male citizen.

Even though the prisoner is stripped of the majority of his rights as a socioeconomic citizen—felons were not able to make contracts or vote—hard labor prisons kept them imbedded within capitalist and corporate structures (Smith 29). Here, the individual’s reform is subverted to the needs of the prison where he or she is working for the institution and the state. Work becomes Burroughs’ focus when he moves to the Castle. When he is not assigned to a work detail immediately, Burroughs hatches an escape plan that involves the hard labor of chipping away at the brick wall of his cell with a nail. Burroughs spends up to sixteen hours a day creating his hole, and in exchange for his cellmates’ silence and their help fashioning tools for him, Burroughs’ escape plan soon involves seven other prisoners (138). First, Burroughs must win his cellmates’ support, which he does through asserting his own impartiality when arguments arise between them (139). By silencing his own voice and simultaneously evacuating his own personal opinions, Burroughs is able to become a leader of the other prisoners. To calm fights, he “would address them to the following purport, viz. ‘Gentlemen; (even the convicts were fond of good words, and would listen when I called them gentlemen much sooner than when I addressed them by a less elevated epithet)” (Burroughs 139).
Referring to the other prisoners as “gentlemen” elevates their station in life above that of criminals and reinforces the project of prison reform. Burroughs uses his position of authority to encourage his fellow inmates to conform to the behavior of exemplary citizens, so even though Burroughs might balk at losing his rights and his disenfranchisement, he does endorse the ideals of prison reform however only for others.

In contrast to how Burroughs uses his authority to encourage others to adhere to the norms of a civil, non-criminal society, he rebels when he feels he is being forced to fit into the collective of the laboring masses. Burroughs does more to protest his imprisonment in the Castle than attempt to escape. When he is forced into work detail, making nails, he enacts his own and then convinces fellow inmates to perform a production slowdown (Burroughs 153-54). Burroughs realizes that he can manipulate the prison’s exploitation of the inmates’ labor, and he also knows that an individual slowdown will not have the same impact as a mass strike. So Burroughs convinces his fellow inmates to not produce nails, and even though he affects camaraderie with these men, he is their leader and initially benefits from their participation in his protest. The payoff for Burroughs is feeling as though he has the power to change his situation, to assume a position of authority, and to manipulate the institution that is controlling him. Unfortunately for Burroughs, the prison staff is able to bribe the prisoners back to productivity with liquor. But, the few days that Burroughs was able to manage the operations of the prison are suggestive of the way that institutions and individuals could swap authority over a group of laborers. This back and forth between Burroughs and the prison staff acknowledges the necessity of a perpetual succession of labor to the immortality of commercial production, and it also reveals how an institution focused on
improving the human character must focus on being humane in a way that leaves it susceptible to exploitation.

In reaction to the prison’s strike breaking tactics, Burroughs voices personal indignation and a more general protest that reveals his conflicted sense of autonomy: “I considered that [the government] had declared open war against me; … I meant to make those arrangements in my conduct, which we see one nation making in their conduct towards another, with whom they are at open war” (153). While Burroughs has grandiose ideas about the government’s interest in his behavior, his language in this statement transitions from the personal, “open war against me,” to the plural, “one nation’s conduct towards another.” No longer is he a solitary, persecuted individual, and instead, Burroughs’s inflated sense of self allows him to take on the offenses the prison levied against the other prisoners and to assume authority over them. Where incarceration causes Burroughs to lose the rights bestowed upon a citizen of the American republic, he assumes power and influence over others in a way that he seemingly cannot outside of the prison. If Burroughs is able to manipulate and control his fellow prisoners, then he is able to coopt the authority of the institution. Much like the values that Marshall stressed in his comment on *Dartmouth v. Woodward*, Burroughs’s protest proves that the prison is immortal—his strike does not release the prisoners from incarceration nor does it provide them with any additional rights or privileges. However, it also shows the institution as susceptible to individuals and individuality in a way that complicates Marshall’s assertion that under the umbrella of a corporation is “a perpetual succession of many persons [who] are considered as the same, and may act as the single individual” (636). Even though the prison houses a perpetual succession of inmates, the urging of one, authority
adverse inmate can lead to a change in how those persons see themselves and how they understand the authority of the institution over them. Prison reform leads to a humanization of the institution, yet it then becomes susceptible to the human elements within it.

As much as Burroughs insists he exists in the same depraved state as his fellow prisoners, he also claims to receive preferential treatment. The reason why Burroughs is treated favorably is never quite explained in the course of the novel, but in asserting that he was singled out for certain liberties, Burroughs offers a way to understand the class and power differences in early America. After his most elaborate escape attempt and subsequent capture, Burroughs supposedly makes a deal with the prison authorities and he secures more freedom for himself: “I therefore told Major Perkins, that I would give up the idea of ever making another attempt for escape, if he would not put me in irons, give me the liberty of the island, and not subject me to the direction or author of Rifford, the overseer. Major Perkins believed me sincere. He ever had occasion to believe what I told him, by way of contract, while I was under his care” (170). Although Burroughs should have been denied the privilege of entering into a contract because of his incarceration, he believes that his readers will believe it was plausible that he was able to reassume his rights as a citizen and forge a deal that excuses him from some of the punishments of prison life. On the one hand, Burroughs’s “pardoning” could reveal the ways that a public institution is susceptible to the machinations of sociopolitical power that control the world outside the penitentiary. Yet, even if this anecdote is simply another example of Burroughs’s bravado and attempt to rewrite his personal history, it
was designed to be credible, indicating that readers would not question whether the ideals guiding social institutions and figures of authority were malleable and exploitable.

Upon his release from the Castle, Burroughs complicates the ideals of both systems of prison reform because, instead of transforming into a productive socioeconomic citizen, he returns to a life of crime. He states: “the situation of the prisoners is such, when they are liberated, … all motives for doing well are taken away… Their previous confinement on the Castle is a sufficient object to their being employed in business” (Burroughs 178). Incarceration and hard labor do not necessarily produce well-meaning subjects, and the larger populace appears skeptical of these reform efforts and unwilling to help convicts re-establish themselves financially. Therefore, even though institutionalized punishment is designed to prepare criminals to reintegrate themselves back into society, Burroughs challenges the efficacy of those ideals. And, if these former convicts have little motivation to do well and little aid in supporting themselves, then there is potential for these reformed citizens to become the perpetual succession of laboring bodies that maintain the immortality of the prison as a commercial laboring enterprise by continuing to commit more crimes. This cycle is seemingly corroborated by Burroughs’s life story: after his release from jail for his counterfeiting crimes, he is accused and convicted of rape, and he returns to jail, only to successfully escape this time (192-218). However, between his unlawful acts, Burroughs convinces others that he has reformed, marries a well-to-do woman, and secures a position as a teacher. Burroughs benefits from the prison’s narrative of social reform and he makes a better life for himself, until “the temptation was too powerful. I fell before it” (195). The republican myth and the ideals of prison reform do not fail Burroughs; it is his own susceptibility to
temptation, manipulating others, and abusing what power he has that causes him to return to jail.

***

So why, according to Robert Frost, does Burroughs, with his loose morals and manipulative tendencies, belong on the same shelf as Franklin, with his dogmatic ethics and ritualistic approaches to living and economic prosperity? On the surface, Franklin’s *The Autobiography* and Burroughs’s *Memoirs* appear to be two very different texts with two very different prescriptions for living; however, when considered alongside Franklin’s turn away from the economic ideals of the agrarian, self-sufficient individual at the end of his life, Burroughs’s *Memoirs* expresses the next step in understanding how narratives that both endorse and undermine republican ideals were used to forward U.S. commercial capitalism. As labor became a moral value, the corporation benefitted. Burroughs’s story is the consequence of Franklin’s quick and easy shift from promoting small-scale agrarianism to small-scale industry, and his time in prison represents the conundrum of America’s legal system as it tries to both promote the health of the nation’s economy while protecting the public. The influence of this dual impulse to support the public and the economy is represented in the nation’s turn to hard labor prison reform and in its attempt to make private institutions human and therefore, palatable to the public. Burroughs enacts the individual profit motives that drive American large-scale commercial capitalism, and his illegal actions gain significance when considered alongside the litigious measures that eventually sanctioned the privilege and authority that Burroughs performs.
For all of his “sophisticated wickedness,” Burroughs is ultimately an entrepreneur, who exemplifies the concepts of American capitalism and corporate personhood in context of the myths of republicanism. Not only does Burroughs’ narrative reveal the characteristically republican idea of the dynamic interdependence among polity, economy, and society, but it also shows how easily those ideas can be manipulated in the service of self-interest. Burroughs’s ability to employ republicanism’s rhetoric as a tactic for his own advancement shows the ways the logics of commercial capitalism were embedded in American culture prior to their legal sanctification. When writers like Burroughs engage with and challenge the ideals of republican virtue as related to America’s economic future, their texts reveal not only their investment in these concepts but also, their desire to share those ideas with their readers.

Works Cited


Chandler, Alfred D., Jr. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American


Lewis, Orlando Faulkland. The Development of American prisons and prison customs,

Madden, Etta. “‘To make a Figure’: Benjamin Rush’s Rhetorical Self-Construction and Scientific Authorship.” Early American Literature 41:2 (2006) 241-272.


CHAPTER THREE

Classes of Sentiment:

Martha Meredith Read and Sarah Savage’s Narrations of Female Labor

Refinement of manner, and of the toilet have long since arrived at their zenith, the meridian splendor of a full dressed woman may dazzle the sight, and enrapure the heart momentarily, but it can never give lasting pleasure to the understanding.—This frivolity in women is attended with more serious consequence than a foolish display of their own vanity; but it is merely a substitute for other employment (Read, “A Second…” 2)

Nine years after Mary Wollstonecraft penned “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” (1792), Martha Meredith Read anonymously published its sequel, “A Second Vindication of the Rights of Women” (1801). By imitating Wollstonecraft’s title, Read associates her work with Wollstonecraft’s didactic style and her advocacy. Read benefits from her predecessor’s recognition and perhaps even published her work anonymously to further connect the two texts. Yet Wollstonecraft and Read approach women’s disenfranchisement differently, and the ways in which Read alters Wollstonecraft’s argument reveals how sentiment and sympathy figured into the American woman’s plea for equal rights and understanding of the value of labor. Wollstonecraft’s tract rejects sentiment for turning women into “objects of pity… that… will soon become objects of contempt” (76), yet Read nuances this critique by considering the relationship between emotion and employment. If women are thought to “enrapure the heart momentarily” due to “refinement of manner and of the toilet” that “dazzle the sight,” then society will only value women as objects of desire, limiting women to engage in vanity rather than
employment (Read 2). For Read, the major repercussion to this focus on female appearance is its potential to hinder a woman’s ability to contribute to society in other ways. Work and social contribution were the measure of virtue in a republican society (Appleby 166; McCoy 175), and women needed to illustrate their worth through these values not by evoking an emotive response to their beauty.

American women were empowered during the Revolution by embracing their economic power; a virtuous woman was, “the guardian against promiscuous consumption” and the overseer of “the management of the table, the furniture, and the feminine part of the apparel [which] are more particularly within her province” (Breen 211, 231). After playing a key role in the American Revolution, women saw the newly won freedoms for men in the country, and they began to imagine the potential of their own suffrage and contributions to society (Davidson 197). However, as early as Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, the United States began to expand voting privileges for men, forcing women, Native and African Americans to make sense of their subjugation in contrast to a coagulation of white male power (Boydston 251-52; Wilentz 117; Wood 265-71). Because economic productivity and virtue were understood to be indicators of national strength and stability in the U.S.(McCoy 169), women sought to assert themselves as economic actors and preservers of virtue in order to argue for their own sociopolitical enfranchisement.

The intersection of virtue and economic reward runs throughout many novels published in Early America (Davidson 99). Sentimental and seduction fiction are often seen as the literary exemplars of women’s empowerment; in some regards, these texts suggest that women have the option to choose whether to succumb to emotion or to avoid
sentiment in the face of temptation (Davidson 200). When written by women, sentimental and seduction fiction represents the author’s labor that produces her sociopolitical agency, and the content of these texts also illustrates such agency. Female writers permeated the porous borders between the private and public sphere to express and profit from their patriotism (Baym, *American Women Writers* 4; Baym *Feminism and American Literary History* 108-09; Davidson 189). In so doing, female writers have been celebrated for “demonstrating democratic values[,] . . . creating fellow feeling among readers[,]” and “figuring the family as a model for the nation” (Tennenhouse 43). However, as easily as sentimental novels can be read as liberating and as promulgating the virtues necessary to national stability, these texts still reify the insurmountable divisions between those at the edges of society and those at its center (Smith 30-31; Stern 3; Baker 653-656). Whether successful or unsuccessful at bringing women in from the margins to the center of society, the sentimental novel linked itself to republican values in the hopes of countering women’s disenfranchisement. Ultimately, republican political agendas became exclusive, and where sentimental fiction and the labor of writing were supposed to bring women into the democratic community, it, instead, became a tool to marginalize them.

Martha Meredith Read and Sarah Savage published, respectively, an epistolary novel and a novella that not only trace the changing structures of republicanism during and after Jefferson’s presidency but also the literary transitions from seduction to the sentimental novel in America. Read’s *Margaretta: or, the Intricacies of the Heart* (1807) and Savage’s *The Factory Girl* (1814) have been recently revived by contemporary literary critics as an integral part of the early American canon. The moral messages imparted by both texts illustrate the ways that changes to the republican ideals of virtue
and productive labor changed women’s perception of their roles and influence on the United States’ sociopolitical spheres. Read’s novel is the story of a country girl who maintains her moral purity in the face of those who attempt to possess her by any means necessary. *Margaretta* approaches labor as a counterforce to seduction and sentiment, as a way to secure freedom over coercion, yet ultimately, Read cannot narrate a conclusion that extricates her protagonist from the rhetoric of republicanism and communal sentiment. As an extension of those themes, Savage’s *The Factory Girl* reveals how sentiment can be a tool to mask and manipulate the laboring masses. Where Read’s inversion of the seduction novel fails, Savage’s adoption of the virtuous ideals of sentimentality sanitizes her writing and the work her protagonist has to perform. Ultimately, these two texts expose how gendered attempts at economic agency were thwarted by the rise of republican and sentimental rhetoric, and reading novels like *Margaretta* that, albeit unsuccessfully, envision alternative models of productive labor expose how quickly the United States began to homogenize its approach to political, economic, and social empowerment.

**Margaretta: Infatuation and Labor**

*Margaretta* was written while the nation was still formulating its political and economic values. During Jefferson’s presidency, the political and economic focus of the early republic shifted in response to festering conflict between France and England (McCoy 210; Wood 267). To preserve the United States’ neutrality and stave off the influence of these other nations, Jefferson asserted that “three essential conditions were necessary to create and sustain such a republican political economy: a national
government free from the taint of corruption, an unobstructed access to an ample supply of open land, and a relatively liberal international commercial order that would offer adequate foreign markets for American’s flourishing agricultural surplus” (McCoy 186). This new agenda sparked a commercial boom and mercantile class, who enjoyed the immense spoils until the Embargo of 1807 prohibited American import and export trade (McCoy 216). For the urban working poor, women, children, and black Americans, this boom was detrimental because it promoted the exploitation of cheap, unskilled labor (Sellers 23-25). Moreover, an expanded commercial market limited the roles that women played in the nation’s economy; no longer were women at the core of the “family-based strategies” that were initially privileged as a part of American republicanism’s scheme for “the achievement of social, economic, and political power” (Boydston 242; Davidson 197). In contrast to their role during the Revolution, women became the image of and responsible for preserving republican virtue, and this role focused women’s attention on the “education of a new generation of republican children” and transformed marriage into an institution that “brings social order” (Samuels 13-14). This narrow role for women limited their ability to produce tangible goods or resources, and the ideals of American economic republicanism did not place equitable value on such work. Margaretta illustrates the class-based marginalization of those who labor strongly as a way to challenge republicanism’s “expansion” of rights to white men, yet the novel also concludes by endorsing the institutions and dynamics that limited women’s place to the domestic sphere.

Upon first glance, Margaretta’s overly sentimental and dramatic plot overshadows its exploration of social class and economic productivity. As Julia Stern has
argued, the sensationalism and self-conscious theatricality of sentimental fiction created a blind spot that caused many contemporary readers and later scholars to dismiss these early American novels (2). Yet, sentiment was integral to American identity: “Americans took very seriously the idea that they were peculiarly a people of sentiment and sensibility, more honest, more generous, more caring than other people” (Wood 282). Even though Americans valued this sense of fellow feeling and republican virtue, this ideal did not complicate the principles that enabled social stratification or economic inequality in the nation (Pocock 42). Sentiment, virtue, and value collide in Margaretta, causing Joseph Fichtelberg to conclude that novel is a manifestation of republicanism’s collision with the volatile market that it created (Critical Fictions 87, 92; “Friendless in Philadelphia” 206; “Heartfelt Verities” 127-33). Labor appears in Margaretta as an oppositional force to sentiment, yet it does so without actually delving into the material realities of those efforts. Margaretta seemingly endorses labor as a way to quiet the voices of the leisured elite and to incorporate the contribution of all kinds of work in national projects, yet the novel’s conclusion cannot imagine the fulfillment of its proposed models.

Margaretta begins in the countryside, somewhere approximate to both Philadelphia and Baltimore that can accommodate wealthy travelers as they make their way between the nation’s first capital and one of its major ports. This is where Margaretta resides with her parents, in a farming community; for monetary reasons, Margaretta’s father is hoping to marry her to the most eligible (wealthy) suitor as quickly as possible. This task does not prove to be too difficult as any passerby, male or female, is magically infatuated with the girl. Margaretta is taken by one of her admirers, Miss Stewart, to her
home in Philadelphia, where the remainder of society also falls in love with her, except Arabella Roulant. Arabella is engaged to William De Burling, another admirer of Margaretta’s, and when she realizes that her betrothal is at risk, Arabella schemes to secure De Burling’s fortune and to separate Margaretta and De Burling forever. Arabella deceives Margaretta, who travels to the Caribbean and England, and De Burling, who adopts a new profession; yet, it ultimately concludes by punishing Arabella, who marries the rakish and profligate Archibald Custon. Initially, the impoverished Margaretta is vulnerable as she navigates the world of the upper class because she does so from a place of obligation and dependence. Yet, Margaretta is saved neither by hard work nor by the grace of communal sentiment; eventually, she is saved by the revelation that she is the child of her protector – Edward Montanan – and his lost love – Lady Montraville – which bestows wealth and status upon Margaretta and enables her to marry De Burling.

_Margaretta_ provides a unique insider’s view on the mores, morals, and motivations of upper class Anglo-Americans living throughout the Atlantic. The contrast between Margaretta’s fortitude and the wealthy elite’s machinations of the working classes exposes a gaping hole in the communities of sympathy and sentiment that republicanism was supposed to foster.

Communal compassion and interpersonal relationships were a part of the American national agenda, which offers one explanation for why the epistolary novel played an important role in the evolution of the American sentimental novel. According to Elizabeth Hewitt, the epistolary novel’s portrayal of social relations is metonymic; they represent the emotional ties upon which republican virtue and national consolidation are either forged or corroded (Hewitt 6, 28). The letters contained in “these novels allow
the voices of the disenfranchised to speak in the midst of a consolidation (national and literary) that would otherwise exclude them... Instead, we can see these works as literary laboratories in which the machinery of national union is interrogated” (Hewitt 51).

Letters are supposed to represent flows of information, the motivations of the writer, and the relationship between the letter writer and its reader. However, focusing on sentiment obscures the socioeconomic consequences of interpersonal relationships in *Margaretta*. The epistolary novel supposedly mimics social interaction, yet, *Margaretta* abbreviates the interactions – letters are written but the response never appears; the counsel sought is never given. Each character writes to the same correspondent throughout the novel and that writer is of the same gender as his or her pen pal, so even though epistolary networks are supposed to foster communities of sentiment, in *Margaretetta*, they appear as linear connections between similarly minded or similarly marginalized parties. So, when read as metonymic, these one-sided relationships indicate the breakdown of communities of sociopolitical republican sentiment, which had arguably never even been established.

The first epistolary relationship in *Margaretta* is forged between the author and her readers, the second epistolary connection exists in the correspondence between the novel’s characters, and then finally, there is the reader’s connection to the novel as a compendium of letters. *Margaretta* opens with a letter addressed to the Ladies of the Female Association for the Relief of Woman and Children in Reduced Circumstances, which was founded to “aid honest, industrious women who had fallen upon misfortune” (Read, “Dedication”). This letter directly addresses the ladies of this association and is simply signed by “the author”; in it, Read praises the women who, “administer comfort to the indigent sufferer, so often must the god-like influence of virtue be experienced, and
repay you with the peace of an approving conscience. This is the only compensation a
generous heart aspires to, and a rich reward arises from a consciousness of having
discharged the claims of humanity” (“Dedication”). The novel opens by reifying the
barriers between women who seek to be compensated for their labor with “the peace of
an approving conscience” and “honest, industrious women” who have “fallen upon
misfortune.” This dedication acknowledges class disparity and women’s role in helping
the disenfranchised, which aligns the novel with the sentimental genre and seductive
moralization (Davidson 172). However, even though Read makes this specific address,
Margaretta is the influencing force of virtue in the eponymous novel and her labor-
intensive work is an integral part of her moral character. Where republican values were
supposed to forge communities of sympathy through acts of charity, the novel inverts this
dynamic and presents work as the force that ultimately imbues characters with moral
virtue and sentiment as an indulgence for the upper classes.

Margaretta’s objectification and marginalization are illustrated by the novel’s
opening letters, which highlight other characters’ infatuation with her and denies her the
right to speak for herself. Miss Stewart declares that she is “in love, according to the
vulgar phrase, with a cottage girl: a sweet pretty creature”; Captain Waller, friend of
De Burling’s, is “wonderfully attracted… a handsome girl, blooming, tall, and slender –
one kiss from [her], would recompense him”; and finally, De Burling, even though
betrothed to another woman, decides he “will learn from [Margaretta] the situation of her
heart, and deduce the balance of [his] happiness, or misery, therefrom,” and he implores,
“sweetly blushing maid! Why do my regards call up this lovely confusion only to give
double rapture to my heart?” (Read, Margaretta 2, 10, 16). These characters are smitten
with Margaretta upon first sight, yet she is not seduced by their infatuation. Although away from the moral structure of the home, Margaretta remains a positive example of a composed and virtuous female. If Margaretta’s social status distinguishes her from the other characters in the novel, who only see her value as something they can possess, then their covetous obsession with Margaretta serves as a critique of the ways members of America’s upper classes fetishized the laboring classes.

Within the confines of Margaretta, certain social classes are susceptible to emotional excess suggesting that the elite have more access to sentimental expressions than others. However, the novel then proposes that this monopoly on feeling might not necessarily be beneficial. When Margaretta does finally introduce herself in the novel, she claims that she is unsentimental. She declares to her pen pal Elce that: “what have I to communicate that might be either amusing or interesting? You say that my letters are short, cool, and inanimate, that the warmth of sentiment does not pervade them that had heretofore done” (Read 24). As Margaretta’s letter directly follows the effusive praise of Miss Stewart’s, De Burling’s, and Waller’s tributes to her, her inanimate nature counterbalances the emotions that infect the other characters. Throughout the novel, Margaretta’s composure contrasts with and injects rationality into her interactions with members of the upper classes. Where Margaretta is willing to admit that her life, at the moment, is neither interesting nor amusing, the other characters, who are enraptured with her, pursue their infatuations without realistically considering the consequences for themselves or her. When the seduction novel becomes the infatuation novel, it exposes how hyper-sentiment quickly mimics avarice and the link between emotion and economy.
Written at a time when novels were thought to have a corrupting effect on young women – should they read about immoral acts? what if they are compelled to try them? (Davidson 110-11) – Margaretta’s play with infatuation, instead of seduction, revises the conventions of the sentimental novel and imagines a protagonist who is seemingly unmoved by seduction schemes and marriage proposals. In a very self-conscious gesture, Margaretta acknowledges the titillating plots of novels and their ability to incite feeling in readers; she toys with this objection to sentimental fiction to defend the lackluster content of her letters to Elce: “Were I the heroine of a novel, it were, perhaps, possible for me to furnish subjects that might excite your mirth or lure from your heart the lambent tear, but as I am only a simple creature who knows nothing of the world, but to work, to eat, and to sleep, to laugh when anything pleases me, or to weep when any little wayward incident of my life vexes me” (Read 24). Margaretta points to the implausibility of her being the heroine of a novel because she lives at the margins of society and because the focus of her life is working, eating, and sleeping. But, Margaretta is the heroine of a novel, and she is one who is an object of infatuation because of her beauty. Humble Margaretta’s intrinsic value, which allows her to avoid the traditional pitfalls of the seduction plot, is juxtaposed with the covetous infatuation of others. This dynamic highlights the way that women, in particular, were objectified for their superficial qualities. Through aligning hyper-sentiment with the emotions that control the commercial market, Margaretta explores how the republican value of communal sympathy connected personal relationships to economic profit.

The American social focus on sentiment, generosity, and caring does not change the institution of marriage, and even though Margaretta and other women refuse
convenient, economically minded marriages, they have difficulty escaping the link between personal finance and matrimony that transforms women into commodities. Miss Stewart introduces Margaretta to her social circle, hoping to improve the girl’s marital chances. Yet, class distinctions cause Margaretta to shy away from any attachment. She declares that her “heart… shall break ere it shall acknowledge to itself that Mr. De Burling is its lord!”; Margaretta resigns herself to the hierarchies of class and declares: “[p]ronounce me the humble cottager, a mere nothing, raised in obscurity, and for the sequestered seclusion of a dark, winding wood, to feed my poultry and regulate my dairy, spin the flaxen thread of a stormy winter’s evening in the dim light of my lamp” (Read 72). The epistolary form is supposed to reveal the author’s true desires, yet Margaretta censures herself. Acknowledging that De Burling is the “lord” of her heart is problematic for Margaretta. This passage exemplifies how sentimental novels reified separate spheres and class position – Margaretta cannot imagine social mobility beyond her “obscurity” – and she seemingly refuses to give into her emotions knowing that fantasizing about De Burling would realistically mean that he – as a man and a member of the upper class – would doubly be her “lord.” Instead of indulging in dreams about De Burling, Margaretta lists off the tasks and chores she performs to contribute to her family’s fiscal wellbeing, and in this list, she uses possessive pronouns – “my poultry” and “my dairy” – that imply a sense of ownership or agency. Margaretta may struggle with her heart, but mainly, the issues she faces are the result of being surrounded by those who indulge their passions, which complicates her reliance on reason.

When Margaretta is read as a novel about infatuation, rather than seduction, its didactic message transforms into an exposé about how sentiment can complicate the
virtuous benefits of labor. De Burling’s leisured lifestyle gives him the time and the means to plot to “secure” Margaretta, even though he cannot marry her. He explains his rakish plan: “[f]ancy, ever busy in forming images, leads a sensible heart to conjecture things on which they build a certain surmise of our consequence in wealth and opulence, or a supposition that we possibly labour under oppressions, and of course claim compassion” (Read 14). Ultimately, this scheme relies upon sentiment and imagination overpowering Margaretta’s reason and sense; De Burling believes that he will excite her curiosity and (mis)lead her perception of his intentions. De Burling thinks not about how his feelings for Margaretta might cloud his reason, but instead, focuses is the ways he can manipulate her emotions. De Burling’s behavior aligns with the standard plot of the seduction novel, but his actions clearly violate the terms of an honest, generous, and caring American community. This play with seduction and infatuation exposes how women might be vulnerable in a society where men hold all the power, and yet because De Burling’s manipulations are thwarted, it also shows how women can oppose their own marginalization.

If republican communities of sentiment occlude the ways that republican political sentiment marginalized members of the community, then it is important to consider what the economic ramifications are when those included in the nation’s political sphere dictate its sociopolitical agendas. De Burling’s lost inheritance is featured in the novel alongside a comparison of large- and small-scale agrarianism. Margaretta’s account of De Burling’s attempt to earn an income in the Americas is a historically accurate depiction of the global economic market and of the tactics the United States pursued to boost its economy. De Burling makes a voyage to the East Indies as “a mean[s] of
acquiring affluence upon the wake of my father’s fortunes… To undertake it myself would be unwise, as I am too little acquainted with the nature of commerce… the activity my business will require may possibly produce in me a change of feeling. My mind is at present enervated with a sensibility rather effeminate” (Read 128). De Burling refers to his overly sentimental state as feminine, and although he turns to labor as a means to “produce a change in feeling,” he does not necessarily see work as masculine. Admitting that it is “unwise” for him to pursue this business venture without having any experience, De Burling represents a leisured class of males, yet his willingness to undertake labor and his valuation of work over sentiment explains why he is rewarded. De Burling depends upon his friendships with wealthy merchants like Waller, Augustus Merton, and John Asmund to help him repair the damage to his family’s fortune. This collective of white men support one another in their economic ventures, imbuing the communities of sentiment and sympathy promoted by republican values with financial value. These partnerships reveal who benefitted from the increased suffrage of voting rights after Jefferson’s election.

When De Burling’s foray into mercantile trade is put into the context of the Revolution of 1800 and the changing tide of republican economics, it indicates the potential for profit that accompanied Jefferson’s election and that elevated a number of white men’s social status. Thinking about Margaretta’s family line, De Burling has a romantic perception of the life and character of the small, American farmer:

what progenitor had the humble Wilmot who had enriched himself with the spoils of neighboring nations? Who in his line was there that had bartered with human creatures and amassed riches at the expense of
honour, conscience, or the feelings of humanity? None. No doubt they were all a set of plodding men with ready change in their pockets to pay for their bottle of whiskey, and a neatly brushed coat, brown or blue, to attend meeting on Sunday, with honesty enough to make all ends meet at the close of the year and nobility of spirit to exert their right to the common claim of liberty and independence, too upright in mind to yield to oppression, and too just and too humane to oppress the oppressed (Read 141).

De Burling’s view of the “humble Wilmot” idealizes American’s agrarian farmers who are not involved in the expansionist, slave-holding avarice. Painting the elite members of society as solely culpable for these social ills is an exaggeration, and De Burling’s contemplation of the “progenitor” of these problems points a subtle finger at England and the lingering influence of the British in America (Shapiro 107). De Burling privileges a family tree that grows from a bit of extra money, a tidy appearance, a commitment to morality, and paid debts. This ideal is an allegory for a simple, agrarian lifestyle that mirrors the Jeffersonian approach to economics. Even though the distinctions between the Federalist and the Jeffersonian economic agendas turned out to be more of the stuff of campaign speeches than of policy decisions, the basic premise behind Jefferson’s campaign filtered into public perception of his presidency (McCoy 187-88). De Burling explores those party differences through redefining the value of America’s social classes by the labor performed by its population. If this labor is exploitative, inhumane, or dishonorable, then what is its value? However, if the labor performed is self-sustaining
and allows for all to exercise their rights to liberty and independence, then it is the ideal course for the individual and, extrapolating out, for the nation.

The circumatlantic epistolary network proposed by Margaretta reflects trade channels and information flows, presenting the epistolary novel as a metonym for more than the health of communal relationships between citizens and indicating the health of the nation’s economic partnerships. Arabella is from Hispanola, and her betrothal to De Burling is based upon a financial agreement made between the couple’s fathers. This partnership marries Arabella’s father’s plantation, run by slave labor, to the perpetuation of De Burling’s status as a member of America’s elite classes. Arabella is shocked that her dowry does not provoke De Burling’s passion in the same way as his obsession for Margaretta does; she laments: “no, the comparison of his love for an unaccomplished, uncultivated, poor country-girl, with his hate of me, even to the scornful rejection of an almost princely fortune, ‘twas that which operated like a firebrand on my soul, and sent its heat to my face” (Read 117). Where Arabella is critical of De Burling for allowing sentiment to dismantle their emotionless marital contract, her reaction and subsequent decision to destroy the couple is solely fueled by rage and a desire for revenge. So, what actually seems to distinguish Margaretta from Arabella is Margaretta’s “sober consideration of having a whole life to spend with a man whom, to consider in the light of a lover, is an object of hatred and aversion to me” which causes her to refuse the marriage her father arranges for her (Read 25). Margaretta rejects a marriage of convenience in favor of her emotions, and Arabella chooses the contractual arrangement and when those terms are betrayed, becomes overwhelmed by emotion and reacts on the basis of sentiment alone.
The novel attends to the corrosive influence of large-scale agrarianism and slavery when it draws attention to the impact that the Haitian Revolution and the Revolution of 1800 had on slavery in the United States and its people. In its description of those of who profit from slave labor rather than their personal labor, *Margaretta* exposes how a life of this sort of leisure allows men and women to give themselves over to emotional excess and irrationality. A man’s character, his virtue, is judged by either his own commitment to work his land or by his equitable and fair treatment of his workers (Alexander 29; Verhoeven 23-24). Mr. Vernon, a minor character in the novel who helps to save Margaretta from being held captive by Mr. Roulant, Arabella’s father, uses land management as a way to condemn Roulant’s character: “‘Your plantation…is in excellent order. Your overseer must be well calculated for his office. He seems industrious and attentive, but, I think, rather too severe in his punishment of your slaves’” (189). Roulant does not manage his own land or the production of his workers, and although his overseer might ensure that the slaves are industrious, Roulant is detached from their labor. Slave labor funds Roulant’s leisure. Vernon’s speech articulates the double-edged sword of the Jeffersonian Revolution, which at once enabled men like Vernon to capitalize on their land and wealth through voting, yet it also meant that the increased disenfranchisement of others to preserve that privilege.

Slavery is displaced in *Margaretta* to Hispanola, and it does not appear as a part of the economy in the Northern part of the United States. This omission follows the presumptions of the founding fathers, who were convinced that slavery would eventually become extinct in the United States, and given that, by 1804, most Northern states had passed laws to eliminate the institution, it seemed as though they might be right (Wood
268). However, the Haitian Revolution, in some ways, catalyzed the Louisiana Purchase, extended slave territory, and expanded the nation’s investment in slavery (Girard 272-77; Kennedy 1). As Vernon continues his romantic vision of agrarian farming in the United States, he optimistically describes a landed economy void of slavery:

I shall sell off my property and move to the northern part of the country of the United States. There, each man who owns a spot of ground works it himself, and when his daily labour is done, he can retire and enjoy the fruits of his industry with a peaceful conscience. Or, gentlemen who possess affluence hire men at just and equitable wages, and when they are paid for their labour, they taste the sweets of liberty and equality with himself (Read, Margaretta 190).

Vernon’s view of landownership, labor, and equality in America exemplifies the republican ideals that helped to form the nation and its constitution (Wood 288). This passage clearly idealizes independence and the labor that secures it; however, as it directly follows Vernon’s condemnation of Rouland, the hypocrisy of these promises metastasizes to reveal how the promise of freedom, wealth, and industry masks the proliferation of institutionalized slavery throughout the Americas. Vernon is a minor character—his purpose is to rescue Margaretta from dependence—yet his discussion of fiscal independence acts as a contrast, comparing evolving social class dynamics with the economic potential of agrarianism.

Hispanola, in contrast to the United States, highlights a variety of types of marginalization, and the small island illustrates the social hypocrisies that afflict the leisure class. Slave labor is a contrast to other types of female dependence, namely
Margaretta’s forced reliance on Arabella’s father and Aunt Debby. With both women marginalized by gender, Debby turns to class and labor as a way to assert her superiority over Margaretta: “‘tis time you should be made to know who you are and learnt to feel the difference of a lady and a country girl;” Debby continues, “with a peevish address, [and] desired to know if [Margaretta] had always been used to eat the bread of idleness; … as industry might serve to keep other thoughts out of [her] head, especially at [her] age, when men mostly have the greatest run through the brain of a girl” (Read 154). Debby wants to make her “feel” like a “country girl” and belittles her for being idle, as though Margaretta has betrayed her position in life by not working. Debby insinuates that work will help check the young girl’s susceptibility to excessive emotion, a twist on the traditional themes of the sentimental novel which does not typically paint labor as the source of redemption from feeling.

The hypocrisy of a woman from the leisured, planter class criticizing the daughter of a famer for being idle is not lost on Margaretta: “I told her I had never as yet eat the bread of dependence, that I would rather prove how unwilling my mind submitted to the unhappy chance that had thrown me on her protection… I would be happy, I said, to be useful to her as long as I should stay, and begged she might give me work immediately” (154). By rewording Debby’s insult so that “idleness” is replaced with “dependence,” Margaretta, assuage her own feelings of dependence. However, even with working for Debby, Margaretta’s remains unable to leave Hispanola, and although she is not as disenfranchised as a slave, she is forced into service without much recourse. Labor is dangled in front of Margaretta as a means of escape, but it is not the solution in this situation; instead, Debby uses work as a way to prove to Margaretta how powerless she
is, and Margareta, even though willing to earn her way out, can only be saved by a man, who is magically revealed to be her wealthy, estranged father.

The novel’s somewhat forward-thinking valuations of women’s rationality and labor vanish once its characters convene in England for the text’s happy conclusion. Once De Burling and Margareta meet again, the circumstances preventing their marriage have reversed – she is now wealthy and titled and his attempt to regain his father’s lost fortune was unsuccessful. Work is not what helps the couple to overcome the obstacles to their union, nor does Margareta seem to enjoy the power that wealth should offer; instead, her newly found father uses his wealth to secure her a husband, he tells DeBurling: “I will present you with the West-Indies estates of my daughter,” and then her mother joins in by offering: “five thousand pounds to put the aforesaid estates under proper arrangement” (Read 328). This dowry is meant to secure Margaretta’s happiness, but it also removes any economic agency she might have had and makes her husband her financial protector. Although Margareta is saved from the ending that typically befalls the heroine in a seduction novel – death – her betrothal is just one provision of a real estate and monetary transaction. She may find herself in the love relationship she desired throughout the novel, but Margareta’s engagement is still tainted by the same sort of financial arrangement she refused in the beginning of the text.

The marriage between Margareta and DeBurling reifies the power held by white, male landowners by ensuring that De Burling’s status and control over landed wealth is preserved, and it also locates the potential for America’s economic, agrarian future in large-scale plantations operated by slave labor. This bequest guarantees that another generation of American plantation and slave owners in the West Indies. Marital sentiment
sanitizes the perpetuation of slavery, which contradicts the novel’s previous condemnation of Roulant and his plantation management. Margaretta’s concluding note reminds readers of a moral message that is complicated by the novel’s own ending: “the ascendance of reason over the passions is exemplified in the character and destiny of Mr. De Burling” (Read 334). De Burling will not directly manage his plantation nor will he work the land, yet he is praised for eschewing sentimental excess and for trying to rebuild his family fortune. Similar to how the Jeffersonian Republicans eventually compromised their campaign ideals to “out-Federalize the Federalists,” De Burling accepts these gifts of wealth and land and recants his newly found work ethic and idealized agrarian values to return to his previous class position.

Margaretta does not simply end by reinforcing class privilege and stratification; it focuses on the possibility of republican economic values that would come from mixing Federalist and Republican approaches to national economic success. The novel sets its conclusion after Jefferson’s election: “Father Wilmot… had gone to the court-house to give his vote for representatives of Cecil County. He came home elated with a hope that the Republican ticket would carry” (Read 331). Although Margaretta is a compendium of letters, each missive is dated using only the month and the day, without any acknowledgement of the year until Margaretta returns to America on the day all white male landowners are able to exercise their voting rights. Wilmot casts his vote for the agrarian Jeffersonians, and as Jefferson was already in his second term by the time Margaretta was published, the reader is aware that farmers like Wilmot helped to secure Jefferson’s first victory. The novel celebrates how the expansion of voting rights led to national economic growth, without mentioning the marginalization that accompanied it.
Margaretta’s biological father moves the United States and becomes “a true republican . . . whose political principles are founded on a system of united federalism, [and he was] warmed with an enthusiastic zeal for equal rights and liberties between man and man” (Read 318-19). Warren is willing to exchange his social position in England for the republican political principles of the United States thereby illustrating the ways Jefferson’s election extended rights and regulations to benefit white men who may not have had voting privileges previously. This endorsement of republican values exemplifies how Jefferson’s election signifies a change where men of different class positions and economic backgrounds, like Wilmot and Warren, had equal rights and liberties to the detriment of other inhabitants of the nation.

The marginalization of women, children, black, and Native Americans was a consequence of white male suffrage in the early Republic, which foreshadowed the exploitation of those groups once industrialization became a dominant economic mode in the U.S. Margaretta exposes how the Republican model for communal sympathy and sentiment encouraged the economic relationships that paved the way for American capitalism; it discusses slavery, large- and small-scale agrarianism, export trade, and concludes with Jefferson’s election and the promise of a republican government. Implicit within a celebration of the Jeffersonian political dynamic is a quiet acknowledgement of those who are not included in its spoils. The epistolary novel relies on sentiment, seduction, and infatuation to intimately dismiss the interpersonal bonds that are supposedly being built across gender and class lines, yet the majority of these relationships are manipulative or one-sided. Pairing the novel’s attention to the Revolution of 1800, slavery, agrarianism, and mercantile trade with its complication of
sentiment reveals how political paradigm shifts and economic opportunity reconceived
the nation’s perception of labor and the laboring masses. The significance of Jefferson’s
election might not have been its peaceful transfer of power nor its falsely labeled
paradigm shift, but instead, how his platform’s rhetoric influenced social values to
sanitize the disenfranchisement of the majority of the laboring masses.

_The Factory Girl: Seduction and Labor_

Pairing _Margaretta_ with _The Factory Girl_ reveals a change in how sentiment and
morality are featured in relation to work and the working classes in American women’s
literature. Where Read is subtly didactic in her endorsement of labor as a counterforce to
sentimental excess, Sarah Savage’s 1814 novella, _The Factory Girl_, uses a heavy hand to
proselytize sentiment and morality as advantageous to promoting labor and productivity.
_The Factory Girl_ is a unique narrative because it portrays “the working poor and …
industrialization – topics which feature prominently in later sentimental novels of the
nineteenth century” (Weyler 184-85); it is “a labor novel where the laborious exercise of
virtue so predominates that work as an exogenous activity, something in operation apart
from a moral typology” (Schocket 41). Yet, unlike Read who does not describe
Margaretta’s labors at all, Savage explores her protagonist’s life as a laborer, detailing
her work as an educator, moralist, and cotton weaver. Labor only appears “exogenous” to
the story when considered as work outside of the home. However, Savage imagines
women’s work as an expansive set of duties that require the female to act as a moral
educator in whatever setting she finds herself. Through telling the story of orphaned
Mary, who represents the young virgin on her way to becoming the ideal Republican
mother (Samuels 15), Savage endorses unmarried women working outside the home because females share and teach domestic, moral values with others. Yet this over-sentimentalizing of work sanitizes why Mary needs to work and the demands of the labor she must perform. When The Factory Girl is read not as a novelty but as an early example of a literary genre that endorses commercial capitalism, it reveals how female sentiment, virtue, and labor became reconceived as the nation’s economy embraced industrialization.

Mary’s story treads upon the familiar moral ground of the sentimental novel: its endorsement of work takes sentiment outside of the home and exposes the moral good women can bring to their communities. Yet, this narrative is also an example of the problems of agrarianism, the family is self-sustaining while Mary’s father is alive, but without his labor, then the production of resources stops. To fill the monetary gap left by her father’s death, Mary goes to work in a newly opened, local factory. The cotton factory is presented as “a different social and moral environment” particularly because there, Mary is confronted with strangers and she must mesh her personal values with those of her work environment (Faherty and White 1). Mary’s religion is “a somewhat generic, nonsectarian Protestantism,” and this appeal to non-specific Christian values makes her a more universal figure and creates a link between industrial work and religion that mimics the connection that Max Weber makes in the early 20th century using Benjamin Franklin as his model (Faherty and White 2). Mary is an educator, even when she is ill or hurting financially, her work goes beyond the factory floor, teaching those around her humility and perseverance. Even though Mary represents a marginalized population of women, the novella takes her paid labor for granted and instead, privileges
her unpaid work, spreading moral value to others. Ultimately, reading the tactics that both Savage and Read deploy in constructing their heroines’ piety and purity through labor exposes how Americans were leveraging their position on women’s work with a national desire for economic progress and profit.

Mary begins working in a factory, reeling cotton; although slavery never appears in *The Factory Girl*, the raw cotton produced in the fields begets more marginalized labor. Had slavery become extinct, as the Federalists anticipated, Mary’s job in the factory may have never existed (Wood 268), suggesting the ways marginalized workers’ labor enabled the marginalization of other members of society. Yet, the often exploitative environment of the factory is not apparent in *The Factory Girl*; Mary forgets that “there was any labour, or were any privations, attending her new situation; and the recollection of this only served to increase the fervency of her desires, that she might be blessed with healthful activity, and persevering diligence in the discharge of her duties” (Savage 6). Mary welcomes her new responsibility and anticipates that it will have a “healthful” impact on her life. After her first day, Mary concludes that this work is neither “difficult nor laborious,” and throughout the novella, Savage describes labor as building the moral and judicious character of its practitioners. *The Factory Girl* sanctifies factory labor to make it acceptable that women, like Mary, to earn a profit outside of the home. The time Mary spends actually working and the physical toil of the labor is barely discussed in the novella; the text highlights the financial and moral profits of Mary’s work rather than the nature of it. Mary’s co-workers benefit from having a moral, female influence in the workplace, demonstrating the social good that can come from women working outside the domestic sphere. Therefore, attending to the novella’s cost/benefit analysis of
women’s work outside the home exposes a way that women’s marginalization through menial, tedious labor became understood to be a social good.

Knowledge of a professional skill, cotton-spinning, transforms Mary into an educator, and once she returns home to her grandmother, she relays the details of her work to her Grandmother: “Mary… was endeavouring, as well as her ignorance on the subject would admit, to describe the complicated machinery of the factory. She had taken particular notice of it, knowing her grandmother’s curiosity would be raised to hear an account of what facilitated so much the art of spinning, in which, in early life, it had been her ambition to excel (Savage 7). The image of Mary sitting side-by-side with her grandmother is a sweet one; she is a good girl who satisfies her grandmother’s curiosity about the new inventions. When Mrs. Burnam’s early interest in spinning was an “ambition,” and her “humble station” is blamed on the fact that she was “precluded” from a “refined education.” The girl’s knowledge has surpassed her grandmother’s, and the passage elevates Mary’s factory work to the educational opportunities available to the upper classes. And, alongside this praise of factory work, the factory itself is also praised for its technological advances and as an institution that teaches and uplifts its workers. When technical training is presented as an education, it privileges the financial opportunities of labor without considering the larger impact of the majority of the populace only learning a skill or an isolated aspect of production.

The Factory Girl reflects upon how industrialization impacts the values of Americans. The owner of the cotton factory, Dr. Mandeville, and the town’s clergyman and moral compass, Mr. Seymore, acknowledge that industrialization can exploit the
powerless members of a community, yet these men shift the blame for these social ills on to the marginalized classes. Mandeville states:

In [the cotton factory in this town] the labours of children are so useful, as to render their wages a temptation to parents to deprive their offspring of the advantages of education; and, for an immediate supply of pressing wants, to rob them of their just rights—the benefit of those publick schools, which were founded peculiarly for the advantage of the poor. These thoughtless parents do not consider that they are taking from their children an essential good, for which money cannot compensate.

Ignorance will necessarily lessen their future respectability in society, and check the stimulating hope of rising into eminence, which, in a free county like ours, may and ought to be cherished, for next to religion it is the best security for honest industry and laudable exertion (Savage 10).

Education for all was a republican value (Gustafson 37-39). Mandeville recognizes that children are at a major disservice when their parents value money over education, but he does not acknowledge how he, as a factory proprietor who employs children, enables this problem. When child labor is presented as the product of flawed parental values, it exonerates the factory from any liability regarding the children’s education. Within this speech, Dr. Mandeville waxes optimistic about education as a source of social mobility and articulates the hope that free, public education will stimulate the nation’s population to rise to “eminence.” Dr. Mandeville equates the benefits of education to that of religion, asserting that education has the power to convert the populace to moral and ethical values that will better the individual and society. This appeal to a large, moral, and well-
educated society mirrors the ideals of republicanism, yet those values are also contradicted by what is best for the financial bottom line of the factory.

The community of sentiment that was supposed to link Americans in a joint cause for economic prosperity does have its downside, where productivity becomes the most valuable personality trait. Mary is initially judged as a worker rather than for her moral, “intrinsic value”: “Mary had no sooner left the factory, than numberless remarks were made upon her. Nancy Raymond… extolled her modest, pleasing manner, and declared she loved her already. Others less discerning, or perhaps less free from envy, pronounced her a stupid thing, declaring they had as lief have a wooden image to reel the cotton, for they did not believe she could turn her eyes” (Savage 7). Mary’s co-workers are “less discerning” and envious, yet the burden is on Mary to prove that she is a good worker and that she is virtuous and productive in a situation where the others around her are not. As a stranger to this setting, Mary is dehumanized; her worth as a person is limited to her potential to be productive. Within the setting of an industrial factory, this alienation of the worker’s character from his or her labor is not necessarily surprising nor does it necessarily reflect a gendered, classed, or racially based marginalization. Instead, Mary maintains her commitment to her values while adapting to the factory’s standards of work, which ultimately, trains her to teach others the virtue of labor.

Mary’s virtue makes her an educator both at home and at the factory, thereby conflating her duties in both spaces with her “true” calling as a woman on the verge of becoming a republican mother. This intersection is especially visible in Mary’s relationship with William, her co-worker, who first scorns Mary because of her virtuous fortitude and then decides to “form his life on the same model, and to make her conduct
the rule of all his actions” (Savage 14). William and Mary’s courtship takes place within the factory, and the factory is determining factor in whether or not they will marry; Mary stipulates that she will not consent to marriage until William is promoted (Savage 18).

The foundation for this romance is laid in the factory, and the tenets and values of industrial capitalism permeate and ultimately, destroy Mary and William’s relationship:

- a young woman of lively manners and handsome person… engaged herself at the factory. [William] was first induced to observe her from the circumstance of her supplying Mary’s place; and soon thought the vacancy very agreeably filled by his new acquaintance, in whom he found such a similarity of opinions and desires, that he began to suspect she would make him a better companion for life, than Mary (Savage 20).

The factory owner easily replaces Mary when she falls ill, ensuring that production continues, and, similarly, William quickly dispenses of his engagement to Mary and replaces her with a new co-worker, Lucy. The factory can be critiqued for its treatment of workers as dispensable cogs in its machinery, where one person can be substituted for another without regard for him or her as a human. And, William’s willingness to quickly replace Mary with Lucy should mean that he and the factory receive the same moral censure by the end of the story. However, although William is left destitute, the factory continues its work and the novella endorses the value of one worker stepping into another’s role as a way to encourage self-reliance and productive labor.

Although agrarian and industrial economic agendas seem incredibly disparate, the factory’s substitution of workers infiltrates the domestic space and interpersonal relationships, showing how easily these profit-gaining enterprises can change social
dynamics. Throughout the novella, Mary is substituted into others’ roles; namely, she becomes the family bread-winner when her father dies, she becomes the homemaker and caretaker of her aunt when her grandmother dies, and then, she becomes the mother to her cousin’s four boys when their mother dies. Seduction and sentimental fiction traditionally relies on the narratives of broken families for its plot (Tennenhouse 45); however, what is striking about The Factory Girl is that Mary assumes the role of provider and is able to maintain her virtue. Mary never questions her responsibilities, even when they are in conflict: “Mary found Mrs. Holden’s infirmities and dread of solitude would oblige her to relinquish her employment at the factory, and she determined to contract her personal expenses, and to devote her time and the income of her little patrimony to the comfort of her aunt” (Savage 25). Mary is indispensible in the house once her grandmother passes away, and the factory can continue to work without Mary because there is always another girl from another town will take on the work. Even though Mary’s Aunt Holden is consistently ungrateful and rude to her niece, Mary’s return to the domestic space is supposed to be a laudable choice. Mary chooses to care for her Aunt over earning an income, a decision that eventually means that she must sell her family land and home. Sentiment and family ties force Mary into making a poor decision for her personal finances, and yet, the emotive rationale justifies the fact that Mary’s situation is even more precarious and she has further disenfranchised herself and her aunt.

In contrast to its portrayal of industrial labor as a valuable education, The Factory Girl also stresses the importance of education to ensure the next generation is not raised to become indistinguishable labor for the factory. Mary and her Aunt become responsible for Mary’s cousin’s four sons, yet the responsibility of supporting so large a family is
more than Mary can handle (Savage 26). Mary recommends to her Aunt that the boys be placed in private families so they can receive “the advantage of schooling,” and she worries that “in the factory they would learn much evil, and no good” (Savage 26). Although Mary’s education occurs in the factory, her cousin’s children, perhaps because they are male, are encouraged to obtain an academic education. Even with Dr. Mandeville’s earlier protestations, the factory hires children and profits from their labor and it remains a place filled with strangers, who have the potential to teach the boys the wrong thing. However, in a private home, the boys would secure an education along with earning a living, which presents work within the domestic sphere as fostering a moral, learned existence as well as a chance for advancement. The boys can correct their marginalization through working within the home before entering the public sphere.

The novella concludes with Mary firmly settled in the domestic sphere, and the final few paragraphs explore sentiment, virtue, and family using the language of the marketplace and comparisons to labor. Upon leaving her home to move to that of her husband, Mary is sad but she realizes that, “an exchange, rather than an accumulation of blessings, is the lot of humanity” (Savage 29). In rearing the children of her widowed husband, Mary accepts the difficulty of the task, knowing, “every situation has its appropriate duties: and Mary was not unmindful that those of a second mother are not always the easiest, or the most pleasant to perform” (Savage 29). Yet, “Mary found an ample reward in the gratitude of the children,” and this compensation is exemplified when the children sell their two lambs and use the profits to buy a writing desk and Bible for Mary (Savage 29). Even when Mary is fully immersed in the home and she no longer has to worry about financially supporting others, she still describes her situation in terms
of “exchange” and “accumulation” and although motherhood has its “duties,” it offers “ample rewards.” Mary’s focus on the fiscal could be attributed to her former financial worries, but her stepchildren’s gift exposes the commercial market’s influence over the home. These children are the product of agrarianism – their father owns a farm and they learn animal husbandry – yet, they trade the fruits of these labors for produced goods. Although the novella concludes with Mary’s situation vastly improved, it subtly suggests industrialization as a force that is infiltrating all facets of the home. So, perhaps, rather than the exchange and accumulation of blessings, the incursion of the marketplace is the lot of humanity.

When read as a sentimental novel, *The Factory Girl* becomes unique as an antecedent to novels like *The Lamplighter* or *Life in the Iron Mills*, and it provisionally endorses female labor outside the home as it investigates the potential moral pitfalls of work. *The Factory Girl* masks the influence industrialization had on American individuals and families through the genre of sentiment. Sentiment is descriptive in *Margaretta*, it indicates personal resolve and character strength, and in *The Factory Girl*, it manipulates the reality of the evolution of the marginalized working classes in the United States and portrays the rise of factory labor as a stepping-stone to Jefferson’s agrarian utopia. However, this idealistic sheen does not quite cover up the repeated occurrence of substitution in the novella, which implies that no matter what role Mary fills, there are other women who either previously occupied those positions and that she is just as easily replaced as they are. And although the exchange of one human for another in the workplace is alarming in its own right, the novella repeats this theme in the domestic sphere – having Mary step in for her father, her grandmother, her cousin’s wife,
and, finally, her widowed husband’s first wife. When *The Factory Girl* is read as complicit with the sentimental novel tradition and its emotive overtures, then it exposes evolving connection between an industrial economy and domestic economy.

***

Neither *Margaretta* nor *The Factory Girl* fulfills its promise of exposing the ways that women can be empowered through their protagonists’ approach to sentiment. The solidification of the republican ideal of American sentiment under Jefferson emerged parallel to the seduction novel’s transformation into the sentimental novel, and, in both instances, sentiment has been interpreted as fostering empowerment and engendering economic agency. Although Read and Savage utilize the familiar trope of sentiment in their texts, neither were successful in their attempts to capitalize on sentiment through writing, and where *Margaretta* eschews sentiment in favor of idealizing labor, *The Factory Girl* idealizes sentiment almost to excuse women’s labor outside of the home. If, as “Novel Economies” has and will continue to illustrate, literary forms collaborate with America’s changing economic forms to share new republican values and ideals with readers, then the transition from seduction to sentimental fiction, as represented by Read’s novel and Savage’s novella, exposes the ways that women’s ability to work outside of the home created a need for women to not fear that they would be treated as objects to be possessed or exploited by the more powerful members of society. *Margaretta* and *The Factory Girl* reveal the ways expectations of sentiment can occlude or transform women’s role as economic laborers. Sentimental and republican rhetoric collaborated to encourage women’s labor while concomitantly dismissing their voices within the sociopolitical arena. When the sentimental novel is read as utilizing the same
rhetoric that republicanism did to marginalize women, then the genre demonstrates how sentimental discourse both provided work and a voice to women while also masking the disenfranchisement of the gender.

Works Cited


Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights

CHAPTER FOUR

Challenging the Value of Land: An Economic James Fenimore Cooper

*The North American Review*’s 1822 literary appraisal of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy: A Tale of Neutral Ground* (1821) provides a reading methodology, explaining to the novel’s audience how they should interpret American historical romance. The first nine pages of the review make claims for the value of the American romance and the characters crafted by American authors. The review then defends Cooper’s revision of the not-so-distant past: “[s]ince then the præterperfect is our only romantic tense, we reply, a little paradoxically perhaps, go back the days when things were newer – but not so quiet as they are now” (*The North American Review* 5). By referring to the præterperfect as “our only romantic tense,” the review’s author uses an antiquated term for the grammatical past tense to address the ways Cooper’s text revisits and fictionalizes historical events that may have still seemed very topical to his readers. *The Spy* links the past to “the days when things were newer” by connecting the American Revolution with the War of 1812, and in so doing, collapses the temporal distance between these events to highlight their similarities. To redefine the United States’ historical legacy, Cooper must both revere the accomplishments of the Revolution while contextualizing the war in light of the political and economic issues plaguing the nation only forty years later.

Cooper’s portrayal of labor, land, and productivity reveal how his historical romances articulate a concern for both historical legacy and for national and fiscal futurity. Although historical romances emerged out of the British or Scottish literary tradition, many scholars assert that Cooper’s forward-thinking narratives helped to put a
distinctly American cast on the genre (Chase 14, 47; Dekker, *James Fenimore Cooper* xii; Kennedy 115). Cooper’s vision of the future of American authorship asserted that the populace’s financial goals are exemplified by the nation’s literary culture: “books are not rejected here, from any want of talent in the writers . . . Talent is sure of too many avenues to wealth and honours, in America, to seek, unnecessarily, an unknown and hazardous path. It is better paid in the ordinary pursuits of life, than it would be likely to be paid by an adventure . . . because practiced, foreign competition is certain” (*The American Democrat and Other Writings* 156). Americans’ commitment to republican economic narratives of progress and pursuit of profit comes at the price of a stunted, national literary culture. This lament questions how an unyielding dedication to certain economic agendas—agrarianism at the time—impacts progress on other fronts.\(^\text{13}\) The link Cooper draws between literary culture and economic progress signifies more than authors not pursuing their writerly talent; the means of production needed to build America’s industrial and commercial economy would also buoy the nation’s book trade. Moreover, Cooper’s comments advocating for enhancing writers’ ability to compete with England and Europe echoes the Jacksonian belief that an expanded commercial marketplace would provide the masses a voice in the nation’s economic and political future (O’Connor 49).

If Cooper can be understood as appropriating the historical romance to create a commercially competitive American literary tradition, then arguably, Andrew Jackson revised the vestiges of republicanism to encourage the nation’s economic viability. The American veneration of agrarianism and land use for subsistence purposes started

\(^{13}\) As Gregory S. Alexander states in *Commodity and Propriety*: “by 1800 virtually all lawyers agreed that, in societies like the United States, law and government developed progressively from feudalism toward the final stage of evolution, commercial republicanism” (105).
changing after The War of 1812, the financial Panic of 1819, and the expansion of male suffrage, American-held territory, and railroad. Andrew Jackson’s populist rhetoric celebrated limited government and free competition “helped ‘clear the path for laissez-faire capitalism,’ which eventually destroyed [the] cherished agrarian order” (Latner 226). The Jacksonian praise for free competition meant a rejection of primogeniture and other practices that restricted access to the means of production to the elite, and it is also embodied in the Democrats’ rejection of “leveling,” or the equal redistribution of land, a position that stemmed from their belief that all persons are not equitably equipped to be producers or industrious enough to capitalize on land ownership (Latner 204-05). The republican, agrarian romance promised equal access to wealth and profit for all Americans; however, these agendas quickly shifted to equate progress with commercial, industrial economic forms that stratified opportunities for financial solvency.

Cooper’s early texts resist idealizing American land and agrarianism as the nation’s source of economic success; land is not a privileged site of economic production, instead, subsistence agriculture and agrarianism are shown as leaving the nation vulnerable. *The Spy* (1821), *Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and *The Prairie* (1827), some of Cooper’s earliest romances, revisit historical events that are not so much in the past to show “continuity in the American experience” and to provoke “critical reflection” in his readership (House 13; McGann 126). Cooper believed that the problems facing America during the Jacksonian period could not be solved by the classical republican ideals, and the plots of his historical romances often highlight a certain class of people or portion of

---

14 This timeline relies on historian Stephen M. Krason’s argument that Jacksonian economic values emerged during President Monroe’s Hamiltonian-type economic policies, grew along with Jackson’s popular support while Adams held the office, and these values were fully developed during Andrew Jackson’s 1828 presidential term (85).
the population as inappropriately wedded to “attitudes or behaviors” that are ineffective (Clark 189; Dekker, *American Historical Romance* 15). Instead, Cooper’s historical romances critique small-scale agrarianism to redefine the best practices for one’s land and labor. Economic readings of Cooper’s novels tend to utilize late nineteenth-century attitudes towards entrepreneurship, consumption, and liberal individualism to discuss Cooper’s play with economic models, profligacy, and human greed (Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper* xxxiii; Nelson, *National Manhood* 62). However, as Jennifer L. Fleissner points out, “[a]s we track the progress of romance differently, so might we also begin to recognize the consequences of our own weddedness to the romance of progress” (174). Cooper’s early works use Jacksonian populist rhetoric to challenge the ideal that land-ownership was the only means to engender a citizen’s patriotic investment in his nation. Consequently, this chapter will reveal how Cooper’s writings change republican moral principles in ways that, like Jackson’s rhetoric, appear expansive and inclusive; however, by shifting valuations of labor and patriotism, these works actually preserved social class hierarchies and encouraged further economic stratification.

**The Romance of Landed Wealth**

Land and wealth appear in *The Spy* as in conflict, primarily due to elitist practices like primogeniture, and additionally because most often, the men who are not fit to claim land do so, citing patriotism, not productive ability, as collateral for ownership. *The Spy* illustrates the political and economic conflicts of the American Revolution through revising the real-life story of John André, a British spy who was detected and hung by American Continental forces, and the moral struggles of one family, the Whartons, with
partisan loyalties (Rosenberg). Both the tradition of literary historical romance and the principles of the American Revolution are rooted in Scottish and French Enlightenment philosophies and writings (Dekker, *American Historical Romance* 9; Hodgson 9). By employing the genre of romance to illustrate the deep-seated connection between conquered land, republican agrarianism, and commercial capitalism, Cooper does more than “[recast] national dissent into a drama of conciliation” (Reid 5); he transforms the rhetoric used to enact sociopolitical change into a revised understanding of economic patriotism and virtue. Inherited wealth and primogeniture served as the foundation for the morals and values of British society and the American colonies; however, once America crafted the terms of its national sovereignty, then expanding the rights of land ownership became a way to encourage the populace’s investment in the nation and its economy (Horwitz 3). As *The Spy* contrasts and conflates America during the Revolution and America during the War of 1812, it endorses the emerging social class hierarchies and illustrates the United States’ readjustment of its political and economic values following the War of 1812 (Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* 278). Cooper’s novels present the realities of the political and economic situation of his day, updating the American republican narrative to assert a distinction from the influence of British economic and literary traditions.

*The Spy* features the means of personal wealth in the colonies – inherited money, mercantile trade, and agrarianism – and the benefits, complacencies, and evolutionary potential of each system. It also portrays these financial opportunities as restricted by patriotism. Contemporaneous to when Cooper wrote *The Spy*, “a considerable degree of [American] economic activity remained within the confines of a local, household
economy. Production remained geared to family consumption, and exchange relationships involved complex networks of neighbors and kin, as well as market trading” (Latner 226). The domestic sphere becomes a theatre within which the implications of economic choices are performed via everyday interactions and transactions. The Spy roots itself in the Wharton family’s home in America, using the story of a wealthy family with financial ties to England and political loyalties divided by the Revolution to allegorically reveal how the nation’s economic health and political well-being are closely tied to individual citizens’ actions. Reading how each member of the family participates in local economics or contributes to his or her partisan cause exposes how the republican narrative idealized labor while de-individuating the significance of work. The Spy rewrites the American Revolution to provide context to the past and to look forward, both politically and economically, and in so doing, the text reevaluates the value of land to assert that proper management and oversight are prerequisite to its economic potential.

Not all Americans celebrated the war that brought about American independence, and Cooper was aware of “the Revolution’s social and personal costs to individuals who in their own way had also loved their native land” (Franklin, “Fathering the Son” 156). The Wharton family home represents the privileges of the British landed gentry and the problems of a domestic economy that protects the interests of the landed gentry. Mr. Wharton, the youngest son of a wealthy British family, established his home in the colonies because his family’s “parliamentary interest” provided him with an estate in New York (Cooper, The Spy 14). Wharton is an aging widow living with his two daughters, Sarah and Frances, while his son, Henry, is a captain in the British army. Politically, Wharton plays both sides, youngest daughter Frances is aligned with the
revolutionary cause, and daughter Sarah and son Henry are loyalists. Even though the Wharton family enjoys the advantages of British governance, their home is still subject to the deprivations of wartime and to British intervention. The war that occurs around and outside the Wharton home does not disturb the strength of the family bond nor does it signify the potential for family ties to build patriotic unity; instead, the economic forces of the Revolution tests the mettle of each character’s partisan values and reveals the ways changing economic forms determine patriotism and a character’s value to his nation.

Economic matters are partisan in *The Spy*: trade, commodity purchases, and banking practices demonstrate an individual’s impact on national health; this emphasis on economic activity highlights labor that occurs both inside and outside the home as well as the purchases made to sustain the home. For some Americans, economic interests forged a collective spirit that became revolutionary patriotism (Breen xv-xvi); however, *The Spy* explores how collectives of loyalist colonists preserved economic ties to England and complicated the colonies’ future financial autonomy. The Whartons vacate their New York City home for their country home, The Locusts, once the British occupy the city, and at this point, the family patriarch, Mr. Wharton “[makes] a provision against future contingencies, by secretly transmitting the whole of his money to the British funds, [and then] this gentleman determined to continue in the theatre of strife, and to maintain so strict a neutrality as to insure the safety of his large estate, whichever party succeeded” (Cooper, *The Spy* 16). Mr. Wharton’s affectations of neutrality are hollow because his money is attached to England, and his desire to keep his American land while banking in England is a reminder of how wealth is valued in each polity. Where England’s economy had moved towards modes of abstract finance; the colonies valued land and resource
production. Wharton’s “provision against future contingencies” suggests that he is conscious of the potential for the Revolution to bring about a significant economic change, yet by “[insuring] the safety of his large estate,” he seemingly assumes that post-Revolution America would continue the traditions of quasi-feudal land ownership and primogeniture enjoyed by the wealthy in England and therefore, his land will maintain its financial value. Wharton’s fiscal provisions suggest that he anticipates that antiquated land-based, economic practices will continue to be profitable in America whereas England will remain on the cutting edge, adopting and adapting to new economic forms.

Citizens with divided political and economic loyalties, like Wharton, represent the domestic financial ambiguities that kept England and America connected long after the Revolutionary War. For Wharton, “[t]he fact of having a son in the royal, or, as it was called, the regular army, had very nearly brought his estates to the hammer… Much as he loved his wealth, Mr. Wharton loved his children better; and he sat gazing on the movements without, with a listless vacancy in his countenance, that fully denoted his imbecility of character” (Cooper, *The Spy* 73). Partisanship’s impact on the domestic sphere becomes quite real for the Wharton family as the war for American independence evolves. Mr. Wharton’s neutrality stands as a sign of his imbecility. As Wharton vacantly watches the movements of American and British soldiers, his home and financial coffers are put in jeopardy, suggesting the stupidity of his passivity. Yet, when it comes to Wharton’s land and his wealth, there are other ways that he is docile; British primogeniture and class politics provided Wharton with these assets yet he uses them solely for a second home. Similar to Cooper’s overt critique of Wharton for sitting by idly during the Revolution, Wharton’s idle land and his divided financial loyalties reflect
his imbecility. When read as an economic censure, this critique of Wharton shows how agrarianism can breed an aristocratic class of landowners whose property does not inspire political investment or economic productivity, thereby pointing out the potential fallacies undergirding republican principles.

Rather than valorizing the home as a space that is supposed to foster virtue and stability in the family and the nation, the Wharton family home is continually threatened by partisanship and its economic consequences. America’s economic future is dependent upon the polity’s ability to break its dependence on British goods and on its ability to become self-sustaining; however, republican agrarianism would never be able to fulfill the manufacturing needs of the American populace. Therefore, if the United States was to become self-sustaining, purchasing manufactured goods and the sale of manufactured goods had to be labeled as unpatriotic. This focus on commodities, which began before and continued past the Revolution, elevated the importance of domestic economy and gave women a pivotal role in revolutionary politics (Breen 211). Where purchasing power was a way for women to have a voice during the Revolution, it also became a way for men to critique women’s patriotic spirit and a marker of class divisions (Breen 228-234). So, when Harvey Birch, the peddler spy, arrives at The Locusts to sell products that would have been manufactured in England, his interactions with Wharton’s daughters illustrate the connection between women, politics, and economic activity: “Sarah, having selected several articles, and satisfactorily arranged the prices, observed in a cheerful voice, – ‘But, Harvey, you have told us no news. Has Lord Cornwallis beaten the rebels again?’”(Cooper, The Spy 28). At the time, the American economy did not have the ability to produce the commodities desired by colonial women, and no
mercantile infrastructure existed to perform the service offered by Birch’s peddling (Sellers 4-5). Sarah’s question about Cornwallis directly links between the goods she just bought with the martial and coercive means that the British used to curb American independence. At first glance, Birch’s business appears as a harbinger of American commodity capitalism, a laudable venture, but when read closely, the women’s interest in Birch’s goods also epitomizes how oblivious some Americans were in making decisions that potentially undermined the revolutionary effort. Patriotism was defined by one’s willingness to boycott or one’s martial mettle during the Revolution, which limited the nation’s economic scope and accounts for the continued mercantile infrastructure problem going forward.

The domestic sphere provides the perfect space to contrast an unpatriotic dependence on manufactured goods with an analysis of the potential profits of an agrarian economy. American resources and natural potential is on display during a dinner party the Wharton family hosts for British and American soldiers. Although this meal should represent domesticity and abundance, it is described using martial rhetoric: the Virginia ham is “marched stiffly” into the room with “[t]he supporter of this savory dish [keeping] his eye on his trust with military precision,” and “[a] third attack brought suitable quantities of potatoes, onions, beets, cold-slaw, rice, and all the other minutia o’ a goodly dinner” (Cooper, The Spy 157-58). This processional casts a hawkish shadow over the colonies’ natural resources and the abundance of food appears as a rank and file member of the American defense. The dinner party suggests that even with the deprivations of wartime, that land is a consistent producer of resources, and therefore, America’s bounty indicates the potential of the independent polity’s economic future.
These foodstuffs, however, are not raw; they have been prepared and processed, and their presentation would not be possible without the servants and slaves who “marched stiffly” or who were the “supporter[s]” of the dishes. Labor becomes an integral part of displaying America’s economic resources and potential, but this appraisal of patriotism is also a hierarchy: the labor of the soldiers and the white men around the table is rewarded by the work of slaves and servants. The novel’s presentation of American patriotism leading to profit is decidedly based on the ideal of republican agrarianism to encourage the labor needed for economic success. However, even as Cooper looks forward to American economic autonomy, his idealized view of independence remains complicated by the colonies dependence on slave labor and immoral modes of production.

The dinner party’s processional of servants and slaves exposes the contradictions of American republicanism. Colonial and early Americans believed that an agrarian economy would foster national success by creating a self-sufficient populace (Verhoeven 12), yet even in this early, ideal stage, wealthy colonists, like Wharton, relied on slave labor to perform the work required to harvest America’s agrarian bounty. The Wharton family’s slave is introduced to readers as: “[t]he faithful old black, who had been reared from infancy in the house of his master, and who, as if in mockery of his degraded state, had been complimented with the name of Caesar… Mr. Caesar Thompson, as he called himself – but Caesar Wharton, as he was styled by the little world to which he was known” (Cooper, The Spy 12). Caesar’s first and surname remind him that he cannot control his identity or the way others refer to his person. Caesar is the only African American character in The Spy, and although his initial introduction acknowledges the injustice of slavery, his subjectivity actually becomes necessary to the novel’s plot
development and the success of other characters. Caesar’s role within *The Spy* is to serve as a plot device, who enable the glory of white, male characters so, his function in the text undermines the challenges Cooper makes to slavery’s dehumanizing influences. Although Caesar is integral to helping white Americans gain independence, these men and women do not become self-reflexively aware of his subjugation. As a character who is meant to represent the ills of slavery but who is almost unconsciously overburdened by other responsibilities within the text, Caesar as a comes to exemplify the numerous labor problems plaguing a sparsely populated society dependent on agrarian resource production for its economic strength.

Slavery was not allowed on English soil, just in the Empire’s colonies, so although the British profited from the resources produced by slave labor, this separation from the “peculiar” institution allowed some moral distance from that aspect of America’s domestic economy. The dinner party at the Wharton’s home concludes with an argument between the Americans and British over slavery that demonstrates the problems of a disempowered colonial economy, such as resource exploitation and slavery. When the British Colonel Wellmere points out the hypocrisy of the colonists’ plea for liberty as they enslave others, the American Doctor Sitgreaves responds, “So long as we were content to remain colonies, nothing was said of our system of domestic slavery; but now, when we are resolute to obtain as much freedom as the vicious system of metropolitan rule has left us, that which is England’s gift has become our reproach” (Cooper, *The Spy* 167). *The Spy* justifies America’s dependence on slave labor by citing British regulations that forced the American colonies to solely produce raw materials. Sitgreaves attempts to exonerate the colonists for their participation in slavery, and he equates the exploitation
of colonial resources with the abuse of enslaved Africans to portray America as economically disenfranchised. This story is convenient; it paints the slave-owner as marginalized and suggests that America’s continued dependence on slavery is solely the product of England’s demand for American resources.

_The Spy_ cannot escape the problems that plague an agrarian economy: such as a dependence on slave labor and an elite, class of landowners who inherited their property and refuse to utilize it. The novel also challenges the belief that natural resource production can lead to independence and economic autonomy; during a time of war, characters purchase manufactured goods and make choices that diminish the financial strength of the American colonies. Attending to the legacy of British economic influence in America reveals one prospective future for the nation, yet, Cooper rewrites this history to show its flaws and then, he attempts to propose an alternative to it. As the nation struggled to define what kinds of labor were the most beneficial to its economic strength, it was also in the process of redefining what constituted patriotism beyond wartime valor and arguably, these two ideals became enmeshed. Even though these martial victories signified a shift in global power dynamics, the British continued to meddle in the American economy, so extracting the romance of patriotic conquest from the Revolution and the War of 1812 reveals how unregulated economic channels were as injurious to the nation as military invasion.

**Commerce, National Economic Agendas, and Historical Adventure**

With its discussion of land as “neutral territory” and local trade, Cooper’s _The Spy_ reveals the ways Americans looked for fiscal stability and highlights the holes in an
agrarian economic focus. Opportunities for profit and prosperity are exemplified by the adventures of The Spy’s titular character, Harvey Birch, whose exploits and wartime service link the Revolution and the War of 1812. Birch’s unknown loyalties enable him to “work” the land through mercantile trade, he moves between British and American camps and sells good to conceal his spying. By affecting neutrality, Birch profits from the war and the colonies benefit from the information he gathers; consequently, within the novel, “neutrality [becomes] a precarious and . . . deceptive label for a dynamic field of fiercely partisan, violent, and antagonistic forces—both military and narrative” (Reid 7).

The antagonisms of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 were rooted in debates over commerce and economic autonomy, making labor and profession key expressions of allegiance. Republican values initially celebrated property-ownership as the source of a citizen’s investment in his nation’s future, but, as commerce became more integral to American autonomy, mercantile trade was elevated to a place of privilege and as a way to engender connection across the country and amongst its inhabitants (Pocock 48-49).

As Cooper wrote about Birch’s mercantile trade, he witnessed the United States’ struggle to defend itself against economic intervention from England. During the War of 1812, American industrial and agricultural producers were strongly affected by British embargoes and impressments, and the agrarian community experienced a difficult financial downturn that continued after the war. In response to this economic instability, American farmers sought to secure their economic way of life by encouraging national isolation and returning to republican rhetoric of self-sufficiency.¹⁵ These protectionist

¹⁵ Even after ceasefire in 1816, the Americans and the British did not stop using market forces and trade to influence one another’s authority on the world stage. Congress did implement certain tariffs to protect some American industries from overseas market competition, but there was no overarching demand for regulatory protection for American manufactures. Consequently, the British took advantage of the U.S.’s
urges during the antebellum period resulted in the slow transition from colonial
dependence on agricultural exports to the rise of America’s industrial economy (Howe,
“The Market Revolution” 259). Cooper’s The Spy relies on readers’ nostalgia for the
ideals of republicanism while also reminding them of the virtues of economic
diversification. Within the novel, the antagonisms and value of economic partisanship are
explored via characters’ actions and professions, and by constructing a hierarchy of labor
and patriotism, Cooper’s writing illustrates literature’s integral role in rethinking the
ways Americans contributed to the national economy, security, and progress.

The exploits of male characters in The Spy appear, for the most part, as
professional hazards, and reading these “adventures” as examples of patriotic labor
reveals how work became transformed into an act of national virtue. Birch’s trade route
traverses agrarian, Westchester, New York, a region that is described in The Spy as
“neutral territory,” so marked by the language of wartime loyalties but seemingly devoid
of conflict (Cooper 1). To label this space as “neutral” occludes the complicated
economic dynamics that wartime brought to the colonies and early Republic; Cooper was
well aware that this area was by no means neutral, given that its history provided him
with the subject matter of the majority of his early novels, such as The Last of the
Mohicans. Fought over during the Seven Years War and coveted as a waterway linking
North America to the Atlantic Ocean, this region remained integral to U.S. diplomatic

open door trade policies, instituted after the War of 1812, by flooding American markets with
manufactured goods which helped to precipitate America’s first financial panic. This first financial panic
represents a moment of American naïveté about the power of market forces on a nation’s economy, and by
the 1820s, the nation began searching for ways to bolster their own export trade as well as ways to protect
manufacturers from being undercut in their local markets. The quest for American economic strength and
autonomy continued (Dupre 264-265).
and economic policy well into the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} This “neutral territory” is altered by its “proximity … to the contending armies [which] had nearly banished the pursuits of agriculture from the land. It was useless for husbandmen to devote his time, and the labor of his hand, to obtain overflowing garners, that the first foraging party would empty” (Cooper, \textit{The Spy} 118). Land becomes useless as anything other than conquered territory during wartime. Agricultural production was a key source of income for colonial Americans whose industrial capabilities were limited by the British (Appleby 177-78). Notably, the passage does not identify whether American or British soldiers make up the “foraging party.” The husbandman’s crops will be seized in the name of patriotism by whichever troops come upon them. So where wartime patriotism is supposed to motivate all men and women to selflessly devote themselves to country, the slowdown of profit and productivity is a problem.

The link between patriotism and profit projects an economic future focused on both local and global marketplaces and one that extends beyond the reach of subsistence agrarianism. Birch puts himself in peril to travel between the British and American armies seeking intelligence and selling his wares, and in certain regards, he embodies the potential of the patriotism and profit dynamic. \textit{The Spy’s} male characters are all introduced according to their military rank, their political affiliation, or their financial situation, yet Birch is labeled by his profession, he is “the peddler.” Marked by labor and unmarked by patriotic ties, Birch is a unique character in the novel: he peddles to disguise

\textsuperscript{16} New York’s Governor DeWitt Clinton, a personal friend of Cooper’s, is known for building the Erie Canal in this region, which bolstered the United States’ ability to trade and to compete on the global market. The Erie Canal was a huge symbol for America’s potential especially as it was built while the nation was recovering from the Panic of 1819. Clinton recognized that international commerce was the necessary next step for the United States, and the construction of the Erie Canal both acknowledged America’s economic immaturity and proposed to solve the nation’s commercial shortcomings (Howe, \textit{What Hath God Wrought} 119; Person xx).
his spying, yet this wartime occupation is not without economic benefit, which calls Birch’s motives into question. Spying grows Birch’s personal business beyond territorial and class boundaries. Birch “possess[es]… the common manners of the country, and [i]s in no way distinguished from the men of his class, but by his acuteness, and the mystery which envelope[s] his movements” (Cooper, *The Spy* 25). Birch’s labor indicates the demand for commodities in the colonies and portrays America’s potential as a future hub of entrepreneurial activity. However, he is “common” and “in no way distinguished from the men of his class,” which dismisses any singularity that might make Birch or his labor special to the American cause.

Although nation is tied to land and to physical borders, *The Spy* shows how partisanship and nationalism, when defined through labor, are more profitable when detached from land. Birch’s adventures are attractive because they yield profit. Birch is the only member of the working class in the novel, and his work exemplifies the link between patriotism and profit; but throughout the text, it is ambiguous whether he works for the Americans or the British, which makes it debatable whether his productive labor is a form of wartime profiteering or example of patriotic duty. If he is aiding the British, Birch’s labor would reflect the colonies’ susceptibility to economic exploitation. The impoverished neutral territory is juxtaposed with Birch’s success: “[t]he war did not interfere with the traffic of the peddler, who seized on the golden opportunity which the interruption of the regular trade afforded, and appeared absorbed in the one grand object of amassing money” (Cooper, *The Spy* 26-27). Birch’s trade demonstrates the possibility for financial growth and entrepreneurial gain in the colonies; trade becomes a definitive source of revenue, showing how mercantilism can contribute to the U.S.’s nascent
economy. Border crossing, for trade or for information, becomes something that harnesses and actualizes American potential, and Birch’s occupation suggests that Americans need to look beyond their local environment for economic strength. Yet, Birch’s economic exploits are not without their tribulations; he experiences significant losses while moving between British and American territory, which points to the need to protect American economic activity. These vulnerabilities illustrate the ways an open market allows for continued intervention and limits the U.S.’s independence.

The simplicity of equating profit and production to patriotism implies that any lucrative act bolsters the nation, yet improper financial acts and instances of bad economic behavior in *The Spy* reveal a hierarchy that privileges certain kinds of labor and, ultimately, certain laborers. The Skinners, a band of soldiers recruited by the American army to “[execute]… lesser plans of annoying the enemy,” are not under the purview of the colonial military and they take it upon themselves to “[relieve] their fellow-citizens from any little excess of temporal prosperity they might be thought to enjoy, under the pretense of patriotism, and the love of liberty” (Cooper, *The Spy* 12-13).

Birch, presumed to be a British loyalist, becomes a target of the Skinners; the Skinners rob Birch of his savings and attempt to arrest him (Cooper, *The Spy* 125-31). The Skinners use the ideals the Revolution – “the pretense of patriotism” and “the love of liberty” – to justify stealing from fellow colonists. The text condemns this type of profiteering to show that misplaced patriotic fervor is not beneficial to the nation. And, as the Skinners’ continue to terrorize the American countryside using patriotic language to rationalize their actions, then their exploitations come to symbolize how a romantic commitment to republican values can obfuscate the real problems facing a polity.
The Spy contrasts the Wharton’s inherited and landed wealth with the Skinners’ self-serving and overzealous patriotism, and it indicates that the aristocracy’s and the revolutionaries’ ways of life are untenable for a national future. The Wharton’s country estate was titled to them, and their connection to the British crown leaves them vulnerable to the Skinners. When the Locusts is looted and razed by the Skinners, their leader commands his band of vigilantes to: “enter the house, I say, and fire the chambers… there is plate and money enough to make you all gentlemen – and revenge too” (Cooper, The Spy 260). The Locusts, as a plot of land, is unproductive; the land’s value is contained within the home and its possessions. The leader of the mercenary soldiers promises that the silver in the Wharton’s home could turn all his men into “gentlemen,” which suggests that commodities, not land, have the power to change class status. In the immediate, only one man is punished for this violence, which seemingly sanctions their destructive patriotism (Cooper, The Spy 388-89). In illustrating the horrors of the Skinners looting the Locusts—it results in Sarah Wharton having a psychological break (Cooper 272),—The Spy illustrates the consequences of republicanism’s two extremes: one, a gentry class that does not productively utilize their land, and two, unchecked populism that violently demands the redistribution of property and wealth. Jacksonian republicanism fought against both these extremes and in so doing, rewrote the economic codes and America’s social hierarchy.

George Washington eventually reveals Birch’s participation in the Revolutionary cause; however, Washington asserts that Birch will never be recognized for his service. The difference between Birch’s labor and Washington’s is highlighted when Washington attempts to pay Birch for his service, yet Birch, “[moves] back, as if refusing the bag”
and states, “[n]o, no, no – not a dollar of your gold will I touch; poor America has need of it all!” (Cooper, *The Spy* 405). Washington’s offer marks a class difference between himself and Birch, and it exemplifies the republican belief that one’s investment in the nation was directly related to property ownership and that it would be financially rewarded. Washington, a patrician landowner, has the character and moral fortitude to be recognized for his patriotism; conversely, Birch, a member of the commercial class, deserves to be paid for his service but not recognized. Ostensibly, Washington’s treatment of Birch is rooted in older republican ideals, and by elongating the story of Birch’s patriotism to the War of 1812, Cooper seemingly asks readers to rethink categorical classifications of patriotism and revises notions of the ideal American.

The final chapters of *The Spy* jump forward in time to conclude with “an American army… once more arrayed against the troops of England; but the scene was transferred from the banks of the Hudson to those of the Niagara” (409). The battle has moved but the poignant “once more” links the Revolution and the War of 1812. *The Spy* challenges the congratulatory narrative of the U.S. independence from British colonialism and asks readers to question the republican values undergirding the nation’s patriotic legacy. For many Americans, the War of 1812 solidified their patriotic urge to preserving the United States as an independent union; in other words, as Cooper saw it, “the war of ’76 is called the war of the revolution [and] that of ’12 is emphatically termed the war of independence” (Cooper, *Notions of Americans* 315). Debatably, the British provoked the U.S. into the War of 1812 by impressing American ships and sailors during the Napoleonic wars. The U.S. fought back with the Embargo Act of 1807, which presumed that the British depended upon American natural resources and would be crippled without
this avenue of trade. And although the embargo sparked an economic depression in
Britain, it caused larger problems in America, where merchants, who were beginning to
build their businesses, became unable to access international markets (Latimer 16-26,
33). So, again, America was in turmoil over British economic intervention, a parallel that
Cooper’s novel exploits as its conclusion makes a seemingly implausible temporal leap to
connect patriotism to national, economic strength.

The economic catalysts of the Revolution and the War of 1812 suggest an
undeniable correlation between British obstruction of American economic potential and
American retaliation. Cooper’s The Spy’s represents the connection between the
Revolution and the War of 1812 is illustrated in final chapters through familial
generations. Characters, who were so adamant in their Revolutionary War loyalties, now
have American offspring fighting in the War of 1812. This temporal jump neatly
transforms all remaining characters into nationalists, as exemplified in the description of
Frances Wharton’s son, Wharton Dunwoodie, within whom “virtuous hopes [are] more
vivid… this youth was tall and fiercely moulded, indicating a just proportion between
strength and activity” (Cooper, The Spy 409). Wharton Dunwoodie is the product of his
parent’s love for their country, and because of that coupling, “virtuous hopes” and the
promise of another generation of patriotic and profit conscious Americans now exists.
However, Wharton and his friends are now fighting another war against the British,
risking their lives to fight the same battle their fathers fought. Their fathers, however,
have not returned to battle, but Birch has. An aging Birch and his patriotism are just as
germane to the War of 1812 as they were to the Revolution. Upon meeting the young
men, Birch declares, “‘T is like our native land… improving with time; God has blessed
both” (Cooper, The Spy 411). Birch compares the young men to the potential of the United States’ territory, which is supposedly blessed and improving; however, as Birch is praising the land’s virtues, it is under siege by the British. During the Revolution, Birch represented the next step in political and economic progress – an individual peddler whose business linked the community and encouraged nationalism – however, the stakes of the battle changed by the War of 1812 to emphasize the significance of economic autonomy. The novel leaves the War of 1812 inconclusive, even though it was published years after conflict was resolved, suggesting that the underlying issues between England and the United States extend beyond martial victory.

Looking forward to the next phase in America’s autonomy, The Spy’s final few statements exalt the “spy of the Neutral Ground, who died as he had lived, devoted to his country, and a martyr to her liberties” (Cooper, The Spy 415). Birch is a martyr, praised for his patriotic loyalty, and his death is the only note of finality in The Spy. The text elides the generic convention of the historical romance by not concluding with the victory of either the Revolution or the War of 1812. Instead The Spy highlights continuity and causation between these events. By refusing to offer a conclusion, Cooper’s novel leaves the reader with questions about the United States’ economic autonomy, border protection, and non-intervention policies in the future. Land is a weak indicator for national success. Yet, without the commercial infrastructure, trade is also just as futile. By acknowledging that land did not fulfill its romanticized, productive economic destiny, then Cooper’s narratives, with their complication of America’s landed legacy, explore the same debates over America’s economic future that the Jacksonians did. By incorporating the virtues of
non-agrarian labor to the story of America’s struggle for independence, Cooper changes the founding narrative of the republic and the economic forms that enabled its existence.

**The Economic Cooper**

When Cooper’s novels are read alongside the economic history of the United States, his texts reveal how the economic predictions that anticipated America’s agrarian success became increasingly complicated by the presence of more American land. As *The Spy* demonstrated, land is rarely “neutral territory,” and *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie* account for how land defines the new nation and these texts tie territory to the promise of trade and the expansion of national entrepreneurialism. The worth of land extends beyond martial conquest. Reading the romance of nation building in Cooper’s novels as an on-going debate over how to best transform land into a financial asset reflects Cooper’s continuing worries about mercantilism. In *The American Democrat*, Cooper writes, “there is a strong disposition in those connected with commerce, to sacrifice all governing rules, to protect the interests of the day… The agriculturalist who loses a crop, suffers an injury, more or less serious, that another year will repair; but the merchant who loses his adventures, is usually ruined” (Cooper, *The American Democrat* 478). Cooper links regulation and sustainable economic growth in this passage, and his view focuses on the long term, mirroring how his portrayal of the past connects to the present day. *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie* debate the role that land has in defining the new nation, and these discussions of the value of land ties territory to the promise of trade and to the expansion of national entrepreneurialism. By following Cooper’s continued evaluation of the importance of land from *The Spy* to *The Last of the
Mohicans and The Prairie, the romance of its bounty becomes transformed, and instead of praising the land for its productive value, these novels explore how man can best utilize the land for commercial success.

Cooper’s seventh novel, The Last of the Mohicans, was the first book composed in his seminal collection of Leatherstocking Tales; in this work, Cooper uses tropes of neutral territory and land possession to complicate narratives of national conquest and success. Mohicans does not contain many overt references to economics, and therefore, the text’s romantic and imperial overtones tend to overshadow readings of the novel as economically coded. Mohicans dramatizes the French and Indian War, a conflict that showed the American colonists how intertwined their financial security was with the health of the British economy (Appleby 142; Breen 235). Albeit indirectly, critics who focus on the ways that Mohicans illustrates the changing U.S. landscape and population engage with Cooper’s rendition of American republicanism. Issues like land expansion and settlement enable male suffrage and citizenship (Rifkin 337), and in order to sanctify such actions, Cooper must renegotiate racial and gender hierarchies to ascribe virtue to landownership rather than land possession (Samuels 89-90). And, Cooper’s novels, with their shifting voices and perspectives, provided a multivalent message about the economic benefits of land and the binary battle between white Americans and Native Americas (Nelson, The World in White and Black 63), which assesses the on-going value of land. When agrarianism was the most profitable venture allowed to colonists, land ownership was the primary economic motivator for America’s inhabitants. Initially, republicanism touted the national value of a large population self-sustaining workers, so this emphasis on land converts the American wilderness into the source of the polity’s
economic future (Verhoeven 34). However, in Cooper’s novels, land is both a site of production and an imperial chess piece, so Mohicans’ version of the French and Indian War becomes a story about resource control and market building.

*Mohicans* begins with an errand into the wilderness of what would become upstate New York, and although battles over American soil were frequent, this particular war is significant because it lead to perpetuating problems between the British and Americans over economics.¹⁷ British Major Duncan Heyward is charged with bringing Alice and Cora Munro to their father, the general, at Fort William Henry. The opening lines of the novel set the scene for this journey, during which “the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the adverse hosts could meet. A wide and apparently an impervious boundary of forests severed the possessions of the hostile provinces of France and England” (Cooper, *Mohicans* 1). This passage subordinates the danger of the clash between the British and the French to the larger threat of the wilderness’s native inhabitants. As the travelers move through the territory, they encounter the history foreshadowed in this introduction: Native American tribes fight among themselves and against the European interlopers for control of the land. This land does not have a neutral history. The characters who ably navigate this contested space are presented in the novel as the future builders of the nation, which aligns with how the British and contemporaneous economic theorists saw the potential of America’s agrarian production. The novel returns to the French and Indian War to praise the men and women who secured the land resources that made America’s vision of agrarian economic progress possible. Yet, the text does not simply presume that progress will come from

---
¹⁷ The Seven Year’s War, a turning point in American-British relations. The colonists believed that the British realized that if the colonists were able to purchase their goods that they could also afford to be taxed. Those taxes eventually became an impetus for the colonists’ rebellion (Breen 10-11)
land conquest; instead, *Mohicans* looks forward to the next stage of economic progress to show its readers how this once prized land must be transformed in the name of national fiscal solvency.

When the travelers finally arrive at the fort and are safe within its confines, Cooper’s story pauses to set up a temporal contrast that reveals how territory conquest can eventually produce economic profit through encouraging trade. Like his observations about sustainable economic activity or his connection between the Revolution and the War of 1812 in *The Spry*, Cooper takes a moment in *Mohicans* to link the past to the present to show the benefit of careful economic planning and infrastructure. He writes:

```
[i]he tourist, the valetudinarian, or the amateur of the beauties of nature, who, in the train of his four-in-hand, now rolls through the scenes we have attempted to describe, in quest of information, health, or pleasure, or floats steadily towards his object on those artificial waters which have sprung up under the administration of a statesman who has dared to stake his political character on the hazardous issue, is not to suppose that his ancestors traversed those hills (Cooper, *Mohicans* 151).
```

This passage’s reference to the artificial waters constructed by a statesman focuses the course of this development on DeWitt Clinton’s Erie Canal (Cooper, *Mohicans* 151). This quote empties the territory of native inhabitants to remind white readers of their conquest and also lauds the government for acting in ways that facilitate trade and economic activity. Historian David Walker Howe asserts that America’s burgeoning economic confidence in the 1820s depended upon the nation’s economic unity, which “acquired tangible meaning… by the initiative of a single state. This state was New York;
its project, the Erie Canal… The canal realized the dream of New York’s Governor DeWitt Clinton… an admirer of the Iroquois who he called the ‘Romans of the Western World” (What Hath God Wrought 117). Clinton’s likening of the Iroquois to the Romans creates a romantic narrative of empire building that uses Native American history as a springboard for American expansion and profit. Yet Cooper suggests that the American who traverses these lands “is not to suppose that his ancestors traversed those hills,” illustrating that this conquest in the name of commerce was supposed to be distinct from early efforts at land expansion and conquest. Land is transformed from something to conquer into an economic conduit that unites Americans in their entrepreneurial endeavors and simplifies travel for business and trade. Conquest of the Hudson Valley enabled the construction of the Erie Canal, and land becomes a means to further national economic prospects, not simply an extension of borders or as additional agrarian territory.

A continuation of Mohican’s wilderness excursion, The Prairie – published in 1827 and the final saga of the Leatherstocking Tales – performs a generational leap, similar to that of The Spy, to show a rethinking of land’s value enables its use for mass production and incorporated business ventures. Cooper sets this story after the Louisiana Purchase, arguably the United States’ first major land expansion (The Prairie 9). While focused on one moment in time, The Prairie addresses economic issues that would eventually come to a head with western land expansion during Cooper’s lifetime (Holt 3). As Susan Kalter argues, “The Prairie advocates a well-laid, stable plan for long-term economic and political dominance in the region” (150). Kalter focuses on American financial stability, and she historicizes the British presence in the region and notes the continued presence of British fur traders (153-54). Yet, unlike The Spy, The Prairie goes
beyond competition with the British to highlight the citizen’s patriotic obligation to perform large-scale productive labor. The novel immediately connects land expansion to commercial economic interests: “[t]he inroad from the East was a new and sudden outbreaking of a people who had endured a momentary restraint after having been rendered nearly resistless by success. The toils and hazards of former undertakings were forgotten as these endless and unexplored regions… were laid open to their enterprise” (Cooper, *The Prairie* 10). In the novel, immigrant Ishmael Bush and his party of settlers – his wife, brothers, children, niece, a bee hunter, a naturalist, and some special cargo – come to the prairie, but for incredibly different reasons. These characters do not simply seek land for cultivation; instead, as the novel unfolds, these characters’ financial motives speak to the potential uses of land beyond agrarian resource production.

Like *The Spy*, characters in *The Prairie* come to embody political and economic agendas, and how they utilize the land becomes exemplary of the land’s potential beyond republican agrarianism. *The Prairie* exposes how once the landscape becomes a site of production, then its value must be controlled and regulated in order to ensure that it is turning a profit. Paul Hover, the bee hunter, becomes a symbol for the prairie’s transformation into a wide expanse of enterprise, and he explains to Natty Bumppo: “I know of but one business that can be followed here with profit… it pays well in the skirts of the settlements, but I should call it a doubtful trade in the more open districts” (Cooper, *The Prairie* 33). Bumppo, aged from his pivotal role in *Mohicans* is moving west to avoid the incursion of American settlers, and earns his living in the prairie as an animal trapper: he turns the land’s resources into a commodity. Hover and Bumppo discuss the difficulty of earning an income beyond subsistence, yet they agree that the
spoils of the prairie can be exported and sold in the more populated areas of the country for a decent profit (Cooper, *The Prairie* 30). Relying on the bounty of natural resources is not enough to secure national economic strength, however, and these two patriotic characters assert the importance of mass production as a way to secure a seemingly wild and un-cultivatable territory. Yet these romantic prognostications about the frontier’s capacity for economic growth are dependent upon the population that settles this territory and their willingness and aptitude for labor.

The enterprising Hover fits neatly into an idealistic, economic narrative that will transform America’s western territory into a site of production, and he is set up in contrast to Bush, whose relationship to America’s bounty is marked by sloth and exploitation. Bush’s wife describes him as “a dull calculator” and “a lazy hand at figures and foreknowledge”; she chastises him for “lolloping about the rock from light till noon, doing nothing but scheme—scheme—scheme” (Cooper, *The Prairie* 123). Bush’s scheme and purpose for venturing into the prairie is that he and his brother have kidnapped Inez, daughter of wealthy planter Don Augustin de Certavallos, for a ransom (Cooper, *The Prairie* 173-77). In retelling the story of Inez’s kidnapping, the novel turns to religious stereotypes: Inez’s superstitious, Catholic father believes his priest that his daughter’s disappearance was her “translation to heaven” whereas her rational, Protestant husband, Captain Duncan Uncas Middleton, works tirelessly to find her. Moreover, her lazy, godless kidnappers are inept and forget to ask for the ransom they seek (Cooper, *The Prairie* 170). These religious stereotypes are economically coded: the wealthy, Spanish landowner represents lingering colonial, aristocratic influence; Middleton, the Protestant, symbolizes the progress of entrepreneurialism and America; and, of course,
the non-religious cannot be trusted to do anything with moral value. These stereotypes distinguish between the inhabitants and immigrants in America to endorse certain approaches to productive labor, namely those that are legal and expandable. And, the novel concludes with another temporal jump to the future, to display how those who engage in acceptable work practices are rewarded.

The prairie produces more than economic resources; it forges fruitful economic and patriotic marital alliances. Hover is united with Ellen Wade, Bush’s wife’s stepdaughter, and Middleton is able to save Inez. Through helping Middleton save Inez, Hover’s path to financial success takes him out of the prairie and away from agrarianism, which ultimately mirrors the nation’s turn away from local markets and towards national economic production. Hover partners with both Bumppo and Middleton in the final chapters; he gives Bumppo a stake in his honey business and “[t]he efforts of Middleton and Inez in behalf of [Hover] were warmly and sagaciously seconded by Ellen… He soon became a landholder, then a prosperous cultivator of the soil, and shortly after a town officer. … Paul is actually at this moment a member of the lower branch of the legislature of the state where he has long resided” (Cooper, The Prairie 391). Hover’s occupations fulfill the need for large-scale production, and ultimately, his success springboards him into a greater role, serving his nation as a politician. In order to truly transform the frontier into a site of production, national laws must protect and ensure that this space can be dedicated to its intended economic purposes. The romances of Middleton’s rescue of Inez and Hover’s marriage to Ellen preserve the family dynamics that bond commercial capitalism and agriculture, and then, these men go on to become the legal legislators for the nation, presumably to mold and build America’s future economic agendas. The
United States needed its agrarian foundation to build both trade alliances and to mercantile infrastructure; yet a next step was needed, one that put in place regulatory policy and protected American citizens in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

***

In 1837 James Fenimore Cooper returned with his family from a sojourn in Europe, and Cooper was incensed to discover that the villagers of Cooperstown had claimed 3-Mile Point, “a wild and picturesque spot on Otsego Lake… that legally belonged to the Cooper estate.” Cooper took legal action and cited his family’s previous ownership of the land to establish claim to the area, even though 3-Mile Point had been sold to cover family debts in the 1820s. In contrast, the villagers argued: “the land was alienable, that it did not belong in any fundamental way to Cooper’s family, and that it was theirs by right of ‘use’” (Tome 143). This argument portrays a late-in-life Cooper as wedded to a stratified, landed economy that mimics English and European feudal land tenure, where labor only offers squatters rights and voided land titles can be reinstated at any point. Cooper rewrites his family’s history of financial troubles to assume possession of land that had been sold, and he defines the value of property-ownership in terms of its use. Literary critics have returned to the 3-Mile Point anecdote as a perceived shift in Cooper’s patriotism; arguing that it portrays him as a curmudgeonly Federalist and shows his personal hypocrisy when it comes to the economic ideals of political republicanism. However, Cooper’s disdain for the community’s usurpation of 3-Mile Point land aligns with the Jacksonian rejection of land redistribution (Latner 204-05). The 3-Mile Point episode exemplifies a continuing paradox that Cooper’s earlier written works and
Jacksonian economic agendas struggle to resolve, namely how to ensure that the value of land, initially perceptible in conquest, does not become obsolete due to poor use.

When Cooper’s novels are defined as fictional retellings of American history, then the texts’ focus on land appears as a way to underscore the volatile value of property ownership in the antebellum United States. Yet, Cooper’s historical romances engage with the past to think through the future; he illustrates the progression of an agrarian economy into a commercial one and demonstrates how literature intertwined popular perceptions of republican virtue and patriotism with evolving ideals about national agendas. The ways that Cooper’s literature links American political and economic progress to a specific vision of patriotism and virtue mirrors the ways in which the Jacksonians revised republicanism to make it particular to the United States’ territorial and economic expansion. These rhetorical maneuvers shaped American literature and elucidate the ways the nation’s political values were altered by its economic agendas. Ultimately, by locating Cooper’s historical romances within their political moment as well as the logics of republicanism elucidates the ways that narrative forms changed alongside economic agendas. Although genres historical romance and ideological traditions like republicanism have roots in a variety of countries and cultures, it is when authors, like Cooper, use these forms to mingle nation-specific history with more immediate debates over politics, economics, and social values that these texts become familiar to and gain persuasive power over their readers.
Works Cited


CHAPTER FIVE
Reproducing Production Value: Emerson, Capitalism, and Slavery

Alas, that I must hint to you that poverty is not an unmixed good, that labor may easily exceed. The sons of the rich have finer forms & in some respects a better organization than the sons of the laborer. The Irish population in our towns, is the most laborious but neither the most moral nor the most intelligent: the experience of the colleagues of Brook Farm was unanimous, ‘We have no thoughts’ (Emerson, *The Journals* G:15).

These new associations are composed of men and women of superior talents and sentiments; yet it may easily be questioned, whether such a community will draw, except in its beginnings, the able and the good; whether, those who have energy, will not prefer their chance of superiority and power in the world, to the humble certainties of the association.

(Emerson, “New England Reformers” 79)

Ralph Waldo Emerson articulates his disdain for George and Sophia Ripley’s utopian, transcendentalist project, Brook Farm, in his private journal. Moreover, Emerson’s public speech on “New England Reformers” is no less critical of the premise behind the utopian farming collective that seeks sociopolitical stability through economic self-sufficiency and collaboration. His critiques of Brook Farm epitomize Emerson’s challenges to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century republican hypotheses about agrarian

---

18 Brook Farm was a transcendentalist projects that sought to remove from society and social economic forms. Premised on the philosophy of French social theorist Charles Fourier, Ripley’s Commune explored associative living arrangements that functioned as alternatives to laissez faire capitalism (Robinson 12). Although societies like Brook Farm did not succeed, their founding principles “suggest the scrutiny and serious critique that Emerson and others of his circle were directing toward established American institutions and social practices” (Robinson 33).
self-sufficiency and its prescribed methods for building virtue amongst the nation’s populace. Economic republicanism was not delivering on its promises—that hard labor will yield an increase in a citizen’s moral virtue and desire to improve him or herself. Emerson’s praise for those who joined Brook Farm, who were of “superior talents and sentiments,” is based in his belief that a certain class of citizens are in “finer form” to reform society and build “a better organization.” By removing from society, these men and women, who “have energy,” are not putting their talents to appropriate use; they must “chance” their “superiority and power in the world” to reform it. These criticisms illustrate Emerson’s optimistic belief that slight adaptations to republicanism’s link between education, labor, and virtue could reform society, yet this ideal is tempered by his pessimistic belief that only select members of the populace can shepherd society towards those changes.

By the time Emerson critiqued Brook Farm, the utopian, transcendentalist endorsement of small-scale agrarian farming was already seen as economically backward and fiscally unsound. Utopian communities idealized subsistence farming as the means to building self-sufficient, independent citizens. However, the antebellum U.S. economy was fueled by cotton grown on farms larger than one hundred acres and harvested by slave labor (Beckert 109-10). Where Emerson’s condemnation of utopian communities or the working classes is often interpreted by literary scholars as exemplifying his classist or elitist approach to social reform (Leverenz 38; Frank 396), his critiques reveal that his rejection of the logical fallacies inherent in early republican ideology’s moral code and the economic forms it endorsed. Early republicanism

---

19 This desire to return to these early American economic forms arguably grew out of the financial panic of 1837 and increasing concerns about the U.S. economy’s market volatility (Horwitz 58)
advocated for agrarianism to endorse nation polities that privileged “private property, individualistic (and elite citizens), rural values, and martial prowess” (Malachuk, “The Republican Philosophy” 406). Emerson’s lectures and writings catalyzed the changing terms of American economic logics, rethinking the ways American agrarianism instilled virtue in the populace and reluctantly celebrating industrial commercialism’s divisions of labor. His rhetoric set the stage for America’s post-bellum industrial turn and crystallized the labor values that kept large portions of the American populace financially insolvent in a diversified economy.

From early on in his career as a public speaker, Emerson’s speeches engaged with economic republicanism and worked to ensure the American populace understood its role as producers in the national economy. This focus on Emerson’s engagement with republicanism might appear to be out of step with influential, recent studies of his political drives and philosophies, primarily those of Neal Dolan and Len Gougeon, who see his writings aligning more with the theories of liberalism and who explore what was occluded when scholars previously presented his work as “pragmatic,” “antihistorical,” and “democratic” (Dolan 4-5; 16-23; Gougeon 1-4). In contrast to these studies’ emphasis on situating Emerson’s line of thinking within the appropriate philosophical archive, this chapter demonstrates the ways that Emerson’s antislavery speeches contend with and transform republicanism’s preexisting economic values and virtues to advocate for a new moral ideal, one which aligns with a commercial ethos. Republicanism offers important context when focusing on Emerson’s lectures because of its emphasis on education; his antislavery addresses seek to raise public consciousness, counter

---

20 This assertion draws on Sophia Forster’s claim that Emerson uses an “early model of labor” in his early career that “allows him to pick up Republican rhetorical threads without threatening that early model’s
“corruption,” and prevent “citizens’ consequent loss of their intellectual independence [which] posed the greatest threat to a republic” (Malachuk, “The Republican Philosophy” 409). By drawing upon the educational tenets of republicanism to advocate against the agrarian economy’s dependency on slave labor, Emerson’s public addresses demonstrate the ways that productive labor and profit—not agricultural production or labor—became valued as nation-changing virtues. Consequently, Emerson’s engagement with economic republican ideals to endorse abolition also served to catalyze large-scale commercialism. As Emerson’s writings revised the relationship between the republicanism’s educational aims and population management, his rhetoric helped to transform early American political ideals into a celebration of the nation’s commercial economic future.

The relationship amongst republican economics, large-scale industrial expansion, and abolition in Emerson’s public works underscores the role that literary writing, public lectures, and perception played in encouraging the American populace to adapt their valuations of labor and labor practices. Instead of linking Emerson’s abstract rhetoric to the value abstractions inherent in capitalism (Rowe 5) or assuming that his endorsement of self-reliant individuality was an endorsement of the unbridled pursuit of free enterprise (Bercovitch 126), this chapter argues that Emerson revises republican rhetoric to transform economic communalism in ways that fit his belief in “a universal moral law”

primary feature: its definition of labor’s instrumental value as secondary to its educative ones.” (40)

However, Forster goes on to draw a connection between the “small cannon” and Emerson’s later works as all fostering the same ideas of labor as a measure of self-reliance and individual self-improvement. This interpretation arguably does not acknowledge the classist and exclusionary hierarchy of a commercial and industrial capitalist America.

21 This chapter focuses on Emerson’s published writings and public addresses, not his journals. This focus is a deliberate exploration of the messages and ideas that Emerson communicated with his audiences that “aspired to provoke aesthetic transformation by summoning public feeling and mobilizing affect as well as thought.” (Fuller 7) These public works are, as Lawrence Buell states, “prime example[s] of the republican conviction that the success of representative democracy hinged on the creation of an informed citizenry through a public sphere created by voluntary participation.” (231).
(Dolan 9) and also his classist approach to harnessing the productive power of the populace. Emerson’s public speeches and published writings present his evolving use of republican rhetoric to empower the populaces’ acceptance of industrialization alongside their disapproval of slavery. In his earlier writings, which have been the subject of literary criticism for decades, Emerson waxes idealistic about republican values and their economic potential. But as he becomes engaged in the abolitionist cause and disillusioned by slavery influence on the nation’s moral conscience, Emerson completely revises the terms of agrarian republicanism to fit the parameters and limitations of industry. The evolution of Emerson’s economic republican values from the generic endorsement of production to the specific celebration of commerce and manufacturing aligns with significant historical economic markers in U.S. history, tracing from the financial panic of 1837 to the consolidation of the U.S. economy under federal control during the Civil War. Drawing upon the collaboration between economic and political republican values established to manage America’s working population, Emerson’s lectures encourage reform by the hands of “men and women of superior talents and sentiments” and remediate value in order to preserve and conserve order and power for select members of society while provoking economic change.

The “Small Canon”: Emerson’s Republican Idealism

Scholarly readings of “Nature” and “Self-Reliance” dominated critical approaches to Emerson as a literary figure since his posthumous admittance into the hallowed halls of

---

22 Arguably, Emerson’s public works were not written to appeal to or change the mindset of Southerners who were pro-slavery and/or large-scale agrarian producers but that did not stop Southerners from reading or engaging with his works. “The unusual virulence of Emerson’s southern critics would seem to indicate that reviewers were making a connection between his influential philosophy and critiques of the South’s particular institution, before Emerson became embroiled in the slavery debate.” (Guinn 175-6)
canonical American literature. These tracts, as well as a few others, overshadow and occlude Emerson’s participation in and writings on the abolition movement because many of the manuscripts for his antislavery speeches were lost, thereby allowing scholars and biographers to form assumptions about his advocacy and ideological beliefs (Gougeon 2-4, 31; Dolan 5-6). Without the context of his antislavery writings, scholars presumed that Emerson was apathetically complicit with the sociopolitical status quo because “transcendentalism work[ed] to rationalize present ways rather than bring about actual social change” (Rowe 40). Those scholars who focus on what is now known as Emerson’s “small canon,” his writings from 1836 to 1844, argued that his emphasis on self-reliance meant that he was “an alienated naysayer sitting primly in his study,” but Len Gougeon’s *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* ushered in a new phase of scholarship that corrects the “stubborn persistence of a myth about Emerson’s apolitical individualism” (Levine and Malachuk 2-3, 15). Although expanding Emerson’s canon has decidedly shed a new light on his political advocacy and investments, these studies have also disengaged his political, republican claims from their economic roots.

Where transcendentalist writers and thinkers removed themselves from society and sought virtue in solitude and self-improvement, Emerson challenges these ideals by privileging education as a communal value. Emerson’s social order is defined by his revised conceptualizations of self-reliance (Hedges 46), “the aggregate,” and education, which ties his views to many of the values associated with American republicanism. Three tracts from Emerson’s “short canon,” “Nature,” “Self-Reliance,” and “The American Scholar,” highlight the ways Emerson addresses and adapts republican ideals about education and labor to create his own ideals for American society. As Sophia
Forster argues, “Emerson’s view of the relationship between the handwork and headwork reflects his emphasis on labor’s promotion of creative self-development” (53). So, by revising public perception of the role the individual plays in society, Emerson laid the rhetorical groundwork for the American populace’s expansive understanding of labor that includes the power of intellectual work. In so doing, Emerson’s writing helped his audiences’ understand that personal virtue was not solely a byproduct of agrarian labor and that other forms of production could also adjust society’s moral compass.

Nature and natural resources were the foundation of early republican economics, and Emerson relied on those ideals to inform American social change and transformation. In his first published work, “Nature,” first issued in 1836 and initially not well received, Emerson explains, “Nature, in its ministray to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man. . . . The useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors . . . By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed” (8; emphasis added). By emphasizing the power of “the aggregate,” Emerson expands upon the ideas of self-reliance and independence crucial to republican economic values and adapts them to economic forms that process the products of nature. Nature’s value is relegated to its materiality and the ways it serves man. “The useful arts,” or the productive labor that brings man profit, rely on “reproductions or new combinations” of “the same natural benefactors,” or, in other words, man’s intelligence and ability to think beyond his circumstances is reflected in his approach to changing the world around him into something of use. Republican rhetoric endorsed labor then education, respectively encouraging the populace’s investment in their community and
the nation-at-large and ensuring that citizen’s values and sense of virtue aligned with what the collective deemed to be in its best interests. “The aggregate” embodies man’s labor, ingenuity, and access to natural resources, and it demonstrates the ways that republican ideals both begin in and expand from their agrarian roots to endorse a diversified economy. And, the aggregate becomes the catalyst for how “the face of the world [will] change.”

Emerson’s small canon contrasts the tenets of transcendentalism with those of republicanism by asserting that the importance of education is not self-improvement but that education informs the individual of his or her obligation to improve society. And, in this context, literary writing and belle lettres feature heavily as a force that produces man’s relationship with society. In “Nature,” Emerson challenges the transcendentalist individualist ethos: “[t]o go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me” (5). Reading and writing disrupt solitude, arguably because when one writes, he is doing so with an audience of interlocutors in mind, and when one reads, he is in conversation with or listening to another. Those who seek to effectively remove themselves from society must not only escape their existence within it but must also leave behind its cultural and intellectual trappings. Therefore, to defect from society one must leave behind its sources of information, and to learn about society and to engage with it, one must read and write within its confines. This model of social engagement, although perhaps a nascent idea in this tiny excerpt, was not unique to Emerson; it mirrors the republican ideal that celebrated education, reading, and writing as a way to promote social cohesion and stability (Gustafson 37-39). The first chapter of “Nature” puts the values of
transcendentalism in conflict with those of republicanism; if reading and writing symbolize education and solitude embodies the transcendentalist urge to isolate from society, then, these two philosophies are oppositional.

Throughout his writings and public speeches, Emerson forms conclusions and then reverses them, revealing both his perspective and the opposing viewpoint as well. This rhetorical style encourages his audience to actively debate the merits of political action, teaching them to analyze ideas and issues; for Emerson, “an original thinker is the only true reformer, and an authentic reformer is foremost an original thinker” (Gurley 325-26; 331). In the following excerpt from “Nature,” Emerson designates who has access to certain types of thought by describing the wide spectrum of man’s potential relationship to nature, and in so doing, he defines human privilege via intellectual capability:

But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. . . . One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. . . . When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. . . . It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter from the tree of the poet (5).

For Emerson, nature has double significance, because it represents both the “the perpetual presence of the sublime” and also “the stick of timber of the wood-cutter” or, in other words, it is both the source of man’s intellectual prowess and his economic fortitude. Whether looking at the stars or a stick of timber, man has the ability to “distinguish” or to perceive nature either as a resource capable of becoming a commodity or as a means to
“make transparent” the atmosphere’s “design.” Not everyone can “distinguish” between nature’s use value and its symbolic value. In a different passage in “Nature,” Emerson states, “[t]o speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing” (5-6). Two years after Emerson wrote “Nature” German astronomer and physicist Friedrich Bessel would officially calculate and prove that the sun is a star (Strous), but a lack of empirical evidence should not occlude the significance of his metaphor as it evolves to link stars and the sun. If the sun is the biggest star yet few adults are incapable of seeing it, then the “perpetual presence of the sublime” that comes when man is solitary and seeing nature is not available to all. In distinguishing between different men’s ability to experience the nuances of nature, Emerson reveals his skeptical view of his fellow citizens’ ability to mentally comprehend what he himself can see.

Social engagement is an underlying theme of Emerson’s writing. “Self-Reliance,” published in 1841, frequently appears alongside “Nature” in scholarship that examines Emerson’s “small canon,” yet despite the essay’s title, its message, arguably, focuses on human relationships and the ways the populace’s economic interactions can shape collective morality. In one of the more infamous passages from this tract, Emerson writes: “Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs” (“Self-Reliance” 134). Emerson illustrates his contempt for conformity through a critique of the ways that society’s politics and
economics frequently demand that a populace put aside “liberty and culture” to serve the interests of the “joint-stock company.” This passage highlights the paradox of republican rhetoric that celebrates self-sufficiency and independent labor as virtuous while also promoting the individual’s responsibility to the polity as a whole. However, in asserting that a society operating on this order “loves not realities nor creators,” Emerson distinguishes between “the aggregate,” which encourages innovation and mutually enabled advancement, and “society as a joint-stock company,” which is indebted to preserving preexisting “names” and “customs.” In some contexts, Emerson’s assessment that society is prone to conventionalism can be read as a rejection of the values of republicanism, but the ways his works attempt to educate readers nuances his critique of conformity and his celebration of self-reliance and refocuses those values on his priorities for social reform.

Although his theoretical link between self-reliance and the aggregate may seem like a contradiction, Emerson both creates and resolves this paradox by redefining the already familiar values of American republicanism. Relying on the public’s investment in education, their community, and a communally held set of moral values and virtues, Emerson shows how non-conformist individualism is a social asset:

The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensationalist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. . . I have my own stern claims and perfect circle. It denies the name of duty to many offices that are called duties. But if I can discharge its debts it enables me to dispense
with the popular code. If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day ("Self-Reliance" 146).

Emerson argues that a “rejection of popular standards” is not necessarily a “rejection of all standard,” and in criticizing those who might take offense at such claims, he encourages independent thought and decision-making. The “bold sensationalist” who relies on the “name of philosophy” to effect his break with society is not the ideal example of non-conformity because he relies on someone else’s thoughts to formulate his own. Those capable of “[denying] the name of duty to many offices that are called duties” are those who are able to think through those decisions and answer to society as well as his or her personal moral code. Before one can simply “dispense with the popular code,” he or she must “discharge its debts,” meaning that one cannot fully denounce social mores presumably because he or she still exists within their confines. Emersonian self-reliance emerges from a deep understanding of social standards, and even though practitioners might eschew the majority of these values, they remain beholden to their understanding and to a consistent evaluation of their personal laws within and against the context of society’s standards and ideals.

Social comprehension is a prerequisite for Emersonian self-reliance. His philosophy links the labor of the non-conformist individual to the responsibilities of reform, and he puts this duty on a select group in society because they are not vulnerable: “It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid, as being very vulnerable themselves” ("Self-Reliance” 137-38). For Emerson, the self-reliant, non-conformist exists in a separate, more privileged social class, a designation that elevates him above
society’s elite and links him to the masses. The non-conformist must “brook the rage of the cultivated classes,” whose anger stems from their sense that they are “very vulnerable” in the face of change and reform. However, “when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow, it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment” ("Self-Reliance" 137-38). Emerson insists that “the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society” should be the focal point for the self-reliant individual’s “magnanimity.” Although this claim resembles republican ideals and seems enlightened, Emerson only entrusts a small group of individuals with the power to address and resolve the “growl and mow” of the “ignorant and poor,” or the majority of U.S. society. The responsibilities of self-reliance develop into a system of privilege that can also be read as the foundation for an even more rigid and arguably exclusive, status hierarchy.

Emerson’s revised social hierarchy would arguably oust a certain class of elite Americans and replace them with a class of individuals who engage with society with the purpose of reforming it rather than maintaining the status quo. In his famous address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837, “The American Scholar,” Emerson exhorts these elite scholars to cease listening “to the courtly muses of Europe” and to embrace “the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, [as] the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, — is it not? of new vigor, when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet” (57). Superficially, Emerson’s address calls for authors of American literature to align their produced work with the tenets of civic republicanism,
incorporating under-represented voices and suggesting that the “new vigor” of a 
represented populace exemplifies “a great stride” and a stimulation of “the extremities” 
of the body politic. But, even with this praise of “the topics of the time,” Emerson’s more 
punitive request is for the educated to share those narratives. U.S. republicanism was 
defined via similar ideals and sought to preserve and conserve order and power for select 
members of society (Appleby 215). Although the premise of a republic is to provide 
representation to the majority of the populace, the economic overtones that were 
immediately associated with American republican values changed to emphasize 
productive labor as the measure of civic virtue.

Emerson’s “small canon” overshadowed his other writings until 1990. Without 
the context of his abolitionist writings, the “small canon” appears to adopt rather than 
adapt republican values. Yet, within the context of Emerson’s political views, his 
challenge to the economic underpinnings of republicanism—agrarianism’s ability to 
foster individual self-reliance and self-sufficiency—emerges from his staunch 
commitment to abolitionism. To adapt the founding principles of early America for a new 
economic climate, Emerson must alter the existent terms that dictate how a citizen can 
and should contribute to the “aggregate.” And, in voicing his plan for social reform and a 
new model for productive virtue, Emerson also shares his concerns that the public and 
politicians might ignore or manipulate his ambitions as a way to further a more profit- 
oriented agenda.
Beyond the Small Canon: Emerson’s Evolving Economics

Emerson’s political advocacy writings and speeches reveal how he transforms the agrarian ideals of republicanism to adjust its principles and protocols to meet his own moral and socioeconomic ideas of progress. Between 1840 and 1850, Emerson’s role as a public speaker and figure in the United States began to change; “[he] began to be seen not primarily as a religious or literary figure, but as something else, and the coalescence of a bourgeois mercantile audience via the press had much to do with this redefinition of [his] role” (Cayton 83). Emerson’s economic republicanism is distinct from the values circulated in early American society because his writings do not ascribe overarching value or virtue to all labor. Republican ideology celebrated agrarian labor as virtuous because this work generated personal and communal profit and an individual’s investment in his nation; however, even as Emerson agrees with this ethos, he challenges it. Emerson’s rhetoric idealizes education as a form of productive labor that will foster a social morality that is based in logic and reason, and his lectures and public writings focus on intellectual growth with the ultimate goal of social reform and changing the populace’s moral compass. And, as Emerson’s public addresses become more politically engaged, his economic prescriptions expand, making room for new economic ideals that may complicate but never compromise his moral philosophy.

In his 1841 “Man the Reformer” speech, Emerson is less equivocal in his description of the way republicanism should operate in society than he was in the “short canon” tracts previously analyzed. This shift is important because it demonstrates his

---

23 For the most part, the audiences at Emerson’s public lectures would have been sympathetic to his ideas about abolition and aligned with his increasing interest in a commercial, industrial America. Those who attended his Mechanics’ Institutions Lecture Series, “were … not mechanics at all, but ‘clerks, shopkeepers, apprentices, … professional men, merchants, warehousemen, schoolboys.’ The new commercial class coalesced around Emerson.” (Cayton 83)
staunch views on public engagement—in contrast to utopian societies that sought to
detach from national culture—and exemplifies the ways he enacted his own prescriptions
for society by speaking to and seeking to educate the populace. Emerson wrote and
delivered his “Man the Reformer” speech to the founding members of Brook Farm
(Robinson 33). Directly addressing his transcendentalist contemporaries and the critiques
they levied against republican politics and values, Emerson states: “We complain that the
politics of masses of the people are so often controlled by designing men, and led in
opposition to manifest justice and the common weal, and to their interest. But the people
do not wish to be represented or ruled by the ignorant and the base” (“Man the Reformer”
48). Speaking to those who find fault in the social injustice of U.S. power dynamics,
those who “complain” that a representative political system puts “designing men” in
power and allows them to lead “in opposition to manifest justice and the common weal,”
Emerson offers an alternative perspective: namely, that the masses do not want to be
ruled by “the ignorant and the base.” Emerson vocalizes these challenges to America’s
political republicanism not to give them legitimacy but to dispense with them, and his
counterargument asserts that society needs the influence of certain members, making a
select few responsible for guiding the majority. Although Emerson does not clearly
articulate who these ideal “designing men” would be, he does address those he considers
his peers and encourages them to engage with society in order to reform it. Emerson’s
defense of republican politics is not necessarily a defense of the system as it is nor does it
endorse those who maintain its status quo; instead, he sees value in the ways
republicanism establishes a top-down hierarchy, giving certain members of society more
influence or power than others.
The American elite understood and feared the power and the paradox of republican politics, which empowered the populace’s collective voice and allowed them to have influence over the course of the country (Grossman 9). In contrast to his concern that the populace could be manipulated into acting against their own best interest, Emerson’s 1844 public lecture, “New England Reformers,” challenges the superficiality of the ways republican social dynamics are supposed to empower the people:

I notice that too, that the ground on which eminent public servants urge the claim of popular education is fear: ‘This country is filling up with thousands of millions of voters, and you must educate them to keep them from our throats.’ We do not believe that any education, any system of philosophy, any influence of genius, will ever give depth of insight to a superficial mind. Having settled ourselves into this infidelity, our skill is expended to procure alleviations, diversion, opiates (81).

Republican politics emphasize the value of education as a way to ensure that the populace made decisions according to established social values and norms (Gustafson 37-39). According to Emerson, thinking of education in this way is short sighted: it limits the potential of education to “give depth of insight to a superficial mind” and therefore, to transform the populace. The consequence of this approach to education is that instead of fostering intellect, it simply produces “alleviations, diversion, opiates.” Republican values can be and have been perverted to appease the populace without actually fulfilling their original promise, and Emerson condemns educators who expend their “skill” in service of such “infidelity.” Although Emerson retains education as a value of his rendition of American republicanism, he emphasizes the influence of educators over
politicians and challenges the ideology’s mutability. Education, labor in itself, taught the ideals of hard work, headwork, and self-development, and as cornerstones of Emerson’s public addresses and writings, these republican values also established the standards that allowed for bootstrap capitalism to succeed in America.

In his desire to ensure that citizens understand their influence within the American political system, Emerson draws attention to the evolution of republican economics, advocating for work that is valuable as a contribution to the “aggregate” power of the nation, not an expression of the individual’s autonomy or self-sufficiency. Emerson contextualizes his own ideals for sociopolitical progress against those of history in “The Times,” and he explores the public’s relationship to social change as a form of labor, looking to harness the collective power of the populace and its potential to affect reform. He states: “An important fact in regard to these aspirations of the people, and laborious efforts for the Better, is this, that whilst each is magnified by the natural exaggeration of its advocates, until it excludes the others from sight, and repels discreet persons by the unfairness of its plea the movements are in reality all parts of one movement” (Emerson, “The Times” 58). Despite the “natural exaggeration” of each cause by its advocates, the people’s “laborious efforts for the Better” are powerful together. Similar to the ways Emerson describes the “aggregate,” the combination of “these aspirations of the people” become “parts of one movement” and enable social change and reform, even if, these efforts appear to be mutually exclusive or would seem to “repel” those with differing ideas. In the context of politics, Emerson’s argument that movements that might appear to “exclude others” actually enable a grander movement seems contradictory, but in the context of economics and economic reform away from slavery, this argument privileges
the division of labor and competition between distinct entities as enabling an end result that is focused on “the Better.” When social reform attempts to change the economic status quo, then it must project the economic agenda it pursues; and as Emerson’s revised theorizations of republican politics, economic success, and social reform solidify, his theorizations endorse the governing principles of commercial capitalism.

Emerson modifies the republican link between the individual and the aggregate to reframe its value in the context of an industrial, commercial economy, and he describes the value of certain types of labor on the basis of their ability to improve society and its collective virtue. In discussing the “immense advantages reaped from the division of labor” in “Man the Reformer,” he is critical, but Emerson’s critique is not about self-sufficiency. He writes: “The use of manual labor is one which never grows obsolete, and which is inapplicable to no person. A man should have a farm or a mechanical craft for his culture. We must have a basis for our higher accomplishments, our delicate entertainments of poetry and philosophy, in the work of our hands” (Emerson, “Man the Reformer” 39-40). Manual labor and the division of labor become problematic when they are deemed to be “inapplicable” to a person or to his or her station. In opposition to the assumptions of republican economic virtue, Emerson does not elevate agrarian over manufacturing labor. Instead, he specifies that all people should work with their hands and that this work informs personal “culture” as well as society’s “higher accomplishments, our delicate entertainments of poetry and philosophy.” The benefits of labor can be divided where the profits of work are not only tangible financial return but also personal and cultural improvement, or the virtues prized by a republic.
Even though Emerson recognizes the pitfalls of industrial capitalism, he still advocates for changing the agrarian economic system because of its connection to slavery and its impact on the public’s moral consciousness. Emerson expands the ways that individual labor can cultivate the self and improve the nation, yet his speeches and public writings do not blindly endorse competitive, commercial economics. In ”Wealth,” an essay included in Emerson’s 1856 English Traits, the collection of his work that sold the most copies during his lifetime (Dolan 261), he contrasts the English model for economic success with America’s. Emerson heaps praise on the British industrial system and its commercial economy, but in outlining its strengths, he also calls into question its impact on those performing the labor driving that economy:

The incessant repetition of the same hand-work dwarfs the man, robs him of his strength, with and versatility, to make a pin-polisher, a buckle-maker, or any other specialty; . . . Then society is admonished of the mischief of the division of labor, and that the best political economy is care and culture of men; for in these crises all are ruined except such as are proper individuals, capable of thought and of new choice and the application of their talent to new labor (548).

An economy driven by commercial manufacture and the division of labor has consequences; namely, “the incessant repetition of the same hand-work,” which, for Emerson, poses an economic and a social problem. Workers incapable of “the application of their talent to new labor” signify crisis and ruin because if such a large swath of the population is unable to learn or adapt to new ideas, technologies, or trends, then they are not furthering economic or social progress. Although he does not forge this connection
for his readers, the fault Emerson finds in British industrialism—namely, its stifling of its laborers’ education and potential—is even more egregious and offensive in the United States’ large-scale agrarian economy and its dependence on slave labor and subjugation. In stating that “the best political economy” is “care and culture of men,” Emerson links national success to individual wellbeing; but, these characteristics and attributes, necessary to the republic, are not solely the byproduct of labor for capital. Economic growth and labor cannot be the sole catalysts for social evolution or reform, a perception that Emerson seeks to counterbalance by emphasizing education. Emerson believes that the populace must be capable of critical thinking that informs their labor practices as well as their relationship to society and social reform.

There is a strong financial upside to the division of labor, but this business practice can occlude or distance the workers and employers from the large-scale impact of their economic choices. These consequences directly contrast with republican tenets that idealize the ways that labor builds an individual’s virtue and national partianship. Rather than advocating for a return to a small-farm, agrarian economy that makes each individual responsible to his nation, Emerson suggests raising the consciousness of the populace. In “Man the Reformer,” he attempts to rewrite the conundrum of large-scale economic production to show how a conscious populace should think of their role within an economy now comprised of aggregate production methods that may hinge on immoral labor practices, namely slavery. Emerson is unyielding when he condemns those who enable slavery through commerce: “We are all implicated, of course, in this change, it is only necessary to ask a few questions as to the progress of the article of commerce from the fields where they grew, to our houses, to become aware that we eat and drink and
wear perjury and fraud in one hundred commodities” (“Man the Reformer” 37). The
profits and products of slavery had so infiltrated the American economy by the 1840s that
Emerson feels all of American society is “implicated” in its immorality. Expanding
slavery’s corruption to include consumers and commercial agents, Emerson reminds
Americans that they do not have to implicitly participate in slavery in order to perpetuate
its use. If labor and the products of labor are linked to “perjury and fraud,” then
republicanism’s expansive celebration of labor as producing a virtuous and socially
conscious populace is inherently flawed. Therefore, Emerson moves to adapt the
republican values familiar to his audience, and in so doing, he privileges the virtues of
education and social awareness over economic production.

Within “Man the Reformer,” Emerson models the ways social reform must work
to change public perception of the virtue associated with labor and economic activity, and
he does so by showing how logic and rational thinking in and of itself can benefit society:

If we suddenly plant our foot, and say,—I will neither eat nor drink nor
wear nor touch any food or fabric which I do not know to be innocent, or
deal with any person whose whole manner of life is not clear and rational,
we shall stand still. But I think we must clear ourselves each one by the
interrogation, whether we have earned our bread today by the hearty
contribution of our energies to the common benefit? (45)

Emerson is willing to overlook the consumer’s participation in the economies created by
slavery, if the consumer is contributing “energies to the common good” and making
decisions “by … interrogation.” This leniency comes from a fear that if anti-slavery
advocates focus their efforts on boycotting rather than acting then the reform efforts
could “stand still.” Like the critiques he levies against transcendentalists who remove from society, Emerson worries that those capable of making the conscious decisions that will lead to abolition will dedicate themselves to personal rather than large-scale ethical improvement. Individualism and self-sufficiency can hinder social reform and evolution because they minimize the citizen’s sense that his work and will connects to and influences “the aggregate.” Where Emerson fears the ways economic republicanism implicates society in slavery and thereby degrades its virtue, he also relies on the principle that the individual’s actions and decisions can contribute to social reform and betterment.

By using his public speeches and writings to champion education and deemphasize the virtues of labor, Emerson’s rhetoric remains consistent with the ethos of republicanism but reprioritizes its principles. For Emerson, republican values and ideals could expand to accommodate new political views, economic forms, and paths to national strength and wealth. These writings and speeches reveal Emerson’s concern that the nation’s celebration of labor and productivity devalued the American populace’s moral conscience. As the battle between slavery advocates and abolitionists became even more heated in the 1850s, Emerson’s public speeches deliberate the prescriptions for economic change that were the catalyzing forces behind emancipation and the end of American slavery. Consequently, Emerson’s argument in “Nature”—his celebration of the “reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man” as “the aggregate … aids” that would be the means by which “the face of the world changed” (8; emphasis added)—gains new meaning in a commercial, industrial economy predicated upon the division of labor. This new economic form was also promising as a means to social reform, with its
employment practices and profit margins having the potential to outperform and overshadow the pecuniary advantages of large-scale agrarianism and slave labor.

**Emerson’s Abolition: An Economic Argument**

Cotton generated profits for more industries in the U.S. economy than simply those citizens who grew it, a fact that complicated moral opposition to slavery.\(^{24}\) To counterbalance this dynamic, Emerson’s abolitionist tracts and public lectures rethink the virtues bestowed by labor and instead, emphasize how integral education and economic, industrial progress are to national strength and stability. Many Northern abolitionists believed that confronting American individuals with the moral sins of slavery would lead the populace to rethink their endorsement of or apathy towards the “peculiar institution.” Literary critics often focus their readings of Emerson’s abolition on his critique of slavery as “the great enemy of self-reliance” that thwarts the individual’s potential (Levine and Malachuk 10).\(^{25}\) But Emerson, as well as some of his contemporaries, understood that eradicating slavery entailed transitioning the American economy away from its reliance on large-scale agricultural resource production. These ideas were prompted by the ease with which the British were able to abolish slavery and emancipate slaves in their colonies (Buell, *Emerson* 253-54), a transition enabled by industrialization. However

---

\(^{24}\) The progressive narrative told about the development of the industrial American economy traditionally occludes slavery and cotton’s significant role in that growth, but contemporary historians like Sven Beckert and Edward E. Baptist as well as earlier historians like Eric Williams have brought to light the very integral role cotton played in catalyzing the American economy and establishing its place in the global market. Cotton and the slave labor that produced it was integral to growing and creating a global economy; not only did cotton production help to establish large-scale agrarian production in the United States, Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, and China, but it also sparked industrialization in these countries as well (Beckert xvii). American “planters’ command of nearly unlimited supplies of land, labor, and capital, and their unparalleled political power” allowed the young nation to dominate the world cotton market (Beckert 105).

\(^{25}\) See also Sacvan Bercovitch’s “Emerson, Individualism, and the Ambiguities of Dissent” and Christopher Newfield’s “Emerson’s Corporate Individualism.”
appealing, there were consequences to industrialization and a commercial market economy. Historian Richard F. Teichgraeber praises Emerson for responding to “extensive and radical [market] changes” as a challenge to critics who would prefer to point out “the crassness and injustice bred by the market that lay in the future” (xii-xiii). Although his prescience may have been based on one model, Emerson was able to anticipate the consequences of the turn to industrial commercialism in the United States because of his time in England. When his antislavery addresses are compared with his lectures on England, these texts reveal that, for Emerson, emancipation and abolition morally outweigh the problems that he knew accompanied the marketplace. Emerson took interest in economic change because he saw it leading to social reform, and his adaptations to republican economic ideals exemplify how the American public came to understand the moral code of a commercial economy that values production, consumption, and labor.

Emerson’s made his first public appeal against slavery in 1844; his “Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies” relies on the republican ideal that an educated or aware populace will be motivated to act in virtuous or moral ways that lead to social evolution. However, Emerson does not limit the spoils of abolition to virtue. Emerson narrates the history of British Emancipation as a victory for human virtue and morality: “[The British Emancipation of the West Indies] was a moral evolution. The history of it is before you. Here was no prodigy, no fabulous hero, no Trojan Horse, no bloody war, but all achieved by plain means of plain men, working not under a leader, but under a sentiment” (“Emancipation of the British West Indies” 112). Emerson praises the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies and the ratified
abolition of slavery in the British Empire because these measures signify that a major shift in social consciousness can occur without bloodshed, a catalytic event, or a charismatic leader. This “moral evolution” is enacted by “plain men,” thereby affirming the values of Emerson’s republicanism that celebrate the “aggregate” power of the populace as the potential force behind social change. Moreover, the primary motivator behind these “plain men” is a commonly held “sentiment,” so even though he emphasizes education as sparking perceptive wisdom, Emerson returns to an innate universal morality as the foundation for abolition and reform. But, this focus on sentiment should not, necessarily, overshadow the fact that Emerson refers to emancipation as an “evolution,” suggesting that a combination of “plain means” and attitudes need to congeal before such progress can be achieved.

However, Emerson’s audience for “Emancipation in the British West Indies” does not have the aggregate power to insist upon abolition, and so he reminds them that a change in widespread sentiment about slavery must be accompanied by a change in economic practice. Slavery produces profit without engendering society’s moral evolution:

From the earliest of time, the negro has been an article of luxury to the commercial nations . . . These men, our benefactors . . . [and] producers of comfort and luxury for the civilized world . . . Their case was left out of the mind and out of the heart of their brothers. The prizes of society, the trumpet of fame, the privileges of learning, of culture, of religion, . . . a perpetual melioration into a finer civility, these were for all, but not for them (Emerson, “Emancipation of the British West Indies” 754).
Emerson’s rhetoric enacts both the dehumanization of and the role that African American slave labor plays in a commercial economy when he refers to slaves as “article[s] of luxury,” suggesting that both the expense and worth associated with the labor and purchase of slaves is superficial, unnecessary, or inflated. His reference to slaves as “benefactors” of “comfort and luxury for the civilized world” appears next to his critiques of these men and women being “left out” of the “the mind” and “heart” of “their brothers,” emphasizing the hypocrisy undergirding “the prizes of society” or republican values like liberty, social equality, and access to education and wealth. In other words, Emerson challenges the belief that the goods produced by slaves can be interpreted as symbols of social development because the immorality behind their methods of production diminishes their value.

For Emerson, emancipation epitomizes society’s progress towards a universal moral code; the evolution of collective virtue that is sparked by human compassion and intellect, not economic need or drive. Emerson asserts, “[t]he history of mankind interests us only as it exhibits a steady gain of truth and right, in the incessant conflict which it records, between the material and the moral nature” (“Emancipation of the British West Indies” 94). Slavery embodies the conflict between “material” and “moral” nature because, arguably, it was the pursuit of material property and the quickly expanding commodity and commercial economy that helped to obfuscate the immoral means by which such growth occurred. The ways in which republican values endorse labor as enhancing morality and virtue actually perpetuated immorality and halted progress because it allowed society to become dependent upon and to justify slavery. Even though Emerson describes the “conflict” between the “material and the moral” as
“incessant,” he also only challenges this dynamic as far as it enables slavery. For Emerson, emancipation and abolition will enable “the history of mankind” to “exhibit a steady gain” of both moral and material “truth and right.”

The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850 and catalyzed Emerson’s public participation in the abolitionist cause. Emerson’s first public response to the law, “The Fugitive Slave Law: An Address to the Citizens of Concord,” given in 1851, presents slavery as a social ill that puts the country at a moral and economic disadvantage:

But of the corrupt society that exists we have never been able to combine any pure prosperity. There is always something in the very advantages of a condition which hurts it. Africa has its malformation; England has its Ireland; Germany its hatred of classes; France its love of gunpowder; Italy its Pope; and America, the most prosperous country in the Universe, has the greatest calamity in the Universe, negro slavery.

When weighed against that which corrupts and hurts all other nations and continents, slavery in the United States is “the greatest calamity.” Emerson asserts that “the advantages of a condition” are what “hurts it,” implying that the potential for slavery to engender “pure prosperity” will always be hindered by its innate corruption. By comparing American slavery and prosperity to colonialism, classism, bellicosity, and popery, Emerson challenges whether the spoils that represent the vestiges of Western power are actually more harmful to national progress. Yet, it must be noted that Emerson begins this list by citing that Africa is hurt by its “malformation,” implying that the polities and people of the continent developed in contrast to the standards of progress in Europe, England, and America. Even though Emerson is sympathetic to the plight of the
slave and critical of the “conditions” that enabled the evolution of Western societies, he is not broad-minded enough to find value in Africa or its people for not developing in accord with the polities he mentions. This critique reveals that Emerson’s progressive ideals are rooted in Western values and measures of progress, revealing its own prejudices.

Emerson gave a second address on the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854, and within this lecture, he rethinks the some of the foundational tenets of American republicanism and the power bestowed upon the masses and their representatives. Concerned about the ways the Fugitive Slave Law compelled the populace to perpetuate slavery, Emerson explores the rhetoric that persuaded Americans to believe the nation had an economic investment in legally mandating that the enslaved person is property: “The way in which the country was dragged to consent to this, and the disastrous defection (on the miserable cry of Union) of the men of letters, of the colleges, of educated men, nay, of some preachers of religion—was the darkest passage in the history. It showed that our prosperity had hurt us, and that we could not be shocked by crime” (“The Fugitive Slave Law” 784). Emerson’s complaint about being “dragged into consent” to slavery epitomizes the paradox of a representative republican government, where the government represents the voice of the majority no matter the strength of opposition to that majority opinion. Emerson seems most offended that “men of letters,” “educated men,” and even “preachers of religion” abandoned their moral objection to slavery to avoid national division as well as profit from the financial prosperity that accompanied slavery. In contrast to the core principles of republicanism, Emerson links all of America’s economic
success to slavery’s corruption, exposing the exploitable structure of the political, economic, and social theory guiding the U.S.’s founding philosophy.

Emerson believes that social evolution comes from increasing the collective intelligence of the populace, so he does not abandon his belief in “the aggregate.” But, he does nuance his ideas after Congress passes the Fugitive Slave Law; Emerson condemns this law for compromising the morals of anti-slavery citizens in favor of privileging the rule of the majority. As Emerson voices his contempt for underlying premise of a republican society because of the Fugitive Slave Law, he reaffirms the strength of republican values while rethinking their potential: “liberty shall be no hasty fruit, but that even on even, population on population, age on age, shall cast itself into the opposite scale, and not until liberty has slowly accumulated weight enough to countervail and preponderate against all this, can the sufficient recoil come” (“Fugitive Slave Law” 790). Liberty, one of the cornerstone values of republicanism, is “no hasty fruit” in America, yet Emerson seems unwilling to challenge its slow distribution to the entire populace. In contrast to the freedoms that the Revolution was supposed to simply enact, Emerson implies that building a republic is a generational, accumulative process that can only occur when there is “weight enough” to cause “sufficient recoil.” It is difficult to tell if Emerson is frustrated by the slow progression of liberty in the United States or if, along with some of his other endorsements of hierarchy, he accepts this dynamic so long as he is not implicated in restricting the freedom of others. However, as Emerson publicly questions slavery’s influence on society, he shifts the focus away from blaming slaveholders for corrupting the populace and instead, argues that the populace must
intellectually evolve in order to accept that the promises of freedom and liberty are available to all.

American society’s progression towards republican values depends upon economic change; without industrialization or a shift away from large-scale agrarianism, abolition is a financially and nationally debilitating proposition. In his 1855 address entitled “American Slavery,” Emerson’s pessimism is evident, especially as he argues that the populace is not proactively thinking through the changes needed to bring society to its next level because of its economic interests: “But, in America, a great imaginative soul, a broad cosmopolitan mind, has not accompanied the immense industrial energy. Among men of thought and education, the unbelief is found as it is in the laymen. A dreary superficiality,—critics instead of thinkers, punsters instead of poets. They think the age of poetry is past. They think the Imagination belongs to the savage era” (124-25). For industrialism to truly lead to progress, it must be accompanied by “cosmopolitan thought.” Therefore, instead of productive labor elevating the nation’s virtue and collective consciousness, Emerson inverts republicanism’s paradigm to assert that the nation’s economic potential is dependent upon the populace’s ability to think beyond “dreary superficiality.” This transposition assigns blame for the nation’s failings to “men of thought and education” and “the laymen,” critiques the populace’s superficial commitment to education and intellectual values, and stands as Emerson’s rejection of his own adaptations to republicanism. When the elite cannot be trusted to pursue education and morality on behalf of the nation’s best interests, then the masses lack the proper models to guide them.
The principles of republicanism advocated for hard work and monetary gain because these practices were supposed to foster virtue and build the populace’s investment in their country’s political and economic health. But, when the benefits of labor obfuscate the immorality of their means of appropriation, then their social value is negated. In “American Slavery,” Emerson argues against the idea that economic labor produces virtue:

What happened after periods of extraordinary prosperity, happened now. They could not see beyond their eye-lids, they dwell in the senses;—cause being out of sight is out of mind:—They see meat and wine, steam and machinery, and the career of wealth. I should find the same ebb of thought from all the wells alike. I should find it in science; I should find it in the philosophy of France, of England, and everywhere alike: a want of faith in laws, a worship of success (127-28).

Although Emerson does not specifically point to slavery in this passage, his argument about prosperity is decidedly linked to the “peculiar institution” given the role that cotton, tobacco, and large-scale resource production had in building and growing the early U.S. economy as an agricultural and industrial powerhouse. Less than seventy-five years after the U.S. gained independence, the nation was already resting on its laurels; economic conditions allowed Americans to “dwell in the senses” and to enjoy the fruits of others’ labor—the “meat and wine, steam and machinery, and the career of wealth”—without maintaining a passion for seeing “beyond their eye-lids.” Slavery fosters indifference, not only in its practitioners but in society as a whole because it creates dependence on the financial profits and resources produced by slave labor. Instead of inspiring virtue or
renewing commitment to the health of the nation, wealth and success cause the populace to want for “faith in laws,” a flaw that can be interpreted as a violation of legal code or moral code. This complacency limits society’s perspective and therefore its scientific and philosophical accomplishments. Therefore, Emerson concludes that there is a flaw in the republican model where prosperity is not the gateway to the populace’s intellectual growth or virtuous commitment to national strength; however, it is unclear as to whether that is simply due to its economic foundation or to the values governing American and Western societies.

Emerson resolves the conflict between republican values and its emphasis on economic progress by returning to the inherent worth of the ideals undergirding the U.S.’s political philosophy and decoupling those principles from financial growth. Further on in “American Slavery” he argues, “But whilst I insist on the doctrine of the independence and the inspiration of the individual, I do not cripple but exalt the social action. Patriotism, public opinion, have real meaning, though there is so much counterfeit rag money abroad under it, that the name is apt to disgust” (Emerson, “American Slavery 134). Here, Emerson celebrates the ways that “independence,” “individualism,” and “public opinion” lead to “patriotism” and contribute to “social action,” or he reaffirms the premise of republicanism. These lauded national characteristics are “apt to disgust” once tainted by “counterfeit rag money abroad,” so when placed into the context of a global economy, American values are corrupted presumably by the lure of prosperity. This argument not only distributes culpability for the American economy’s dependence on slave labor, but it also suggests that foreign money and global markets exploit the terminology of republicanism for their own gain, cheapening the nation’s values in the
process. Emerson’s critique of the marketplace’s influence seems to advocate for a return to eighteenth-century arguments for national self-sufficiency; however, these values, which are the foundation of American virtue and economic republicanism, were corrupted alongside the nation’s commercial growth. Republican values were compromised as they evolved to accommodate for large-scale production, both agricultural and commercial, and in identifying this conundrum, Emerson highlights the problem inherent to linking work with virtue.

As the United States teetered on the edge of civil war, Emerson’s writing maligned the nation’s willingness to compromise its moral virtue in favor of championing its commitment to its founding principles. Emerson published *Conduct of Life*, a collection of essays that were initially a part of his 1851 lecture series. The first essay, “Fate,” offers a pessimistic view of the ways America’s progress is building its future. “Fate” returns to themes that were the cornerstone of Emerson’s early writings and his vision of republicanism values and rethinks their consequences. He writes,

> Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free. And though nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are, and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper preamble like a ‘Declaration of Independence,’ or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or to act, yet it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other (Emerson, “Fate” 19).

Manual labor may have ensured the slave’s investment in the ideals of American republicanism, but this type of work does not necessarily engender and share those values
with the entire populace. Emerson privileges headwork and intellect, not just labor, and in so doing, he makes all other tenets of American republicanism beholden to an abstract form of employment, one that will not necessarily be measurable in terms of production or yield. Intellect symbolizes the ability to overcome conformity; fate is resignation to the status quo. So, when Emerson, seeming patronizing and dismissive, states: “nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves,” his comment links those who labor with the hollow significance of the ideals of republicanism. Instead of turning to the promises made in the Declaration of Independence and other founding national principles and assume their “fated” inevitability for all Americans, Emerson callously describes the plight of slaves to publicly “command” thought and action, relying on intellect to change the collective consciousness.

If “Fate” re-navigates the pathway set by republican principles, then “Wealth,” another essay in The Conduct of Life collection, rethinks the economic agendas and logics that enabled a progression between a self-sufficient agrarian farming economy and one dependent upon large-scale, slavery-cultivated agricultural exports and global trade. Emerson changes the terminology he uses to describe the citizen’s obligation to the national economy and in so doing, he creates a new national economic agenda; he states, “Every man is a consumer, and ought to be a producer. He fails to make his place good in the world unless he not only pays is debt but also adds something to the common wealth. Nor can he do justice to his genius without making some larger demand on the world than a bare subsistence. He is by constitution expensive, and needs to be rich” (“Wealth” 622). The ideal American citizen is not the self-reliant farmer, but a consumer transformed into a producer, a populace motivated to “add something to the common wealth.” By
declaring that one cannot simply provide for his own “bare subsistence,” Emerson
discusses the ideal of the republican, agrarian farmer and instead, argues that the
productive citizen seeking to make his “place good in the world” must counterbalance
being “expensive” with doing “justice to his larger genius” and being “rich.” Although, in
this passage, Emerson does not define what he means in his call for “every man” “to be a
producer,” his terminology adapts early American economic ideals for new social and
economic contexts.

“Wealth” redefines the trappings of an agrarian, republican economy and shows
how the values it instilled in the populace apply in other systems of production. Emerson,
in very direct terms, states: “property is an intellectual production” and “cultivated labor
drives out brute labor” (“Wealth” 628); importantly, “every step of civil advancement
makes every man’s dollar worth more” (“Wealth” 630). Rather than signifying a
connection amongst land, resource cultivation, and national economic potential, property
now symbolizes innovation and mental prowess instead of the virtues of ownership. As
Emerson amends American economic republicanism to accommodate for innovations in
production, he challenges established economic practices, especially those that rely on
“brute labor.” This transforms the power of labor from “brute” force and willingness to
work into a “cultivated” skill; unceasing handwork is less desirable than a thoughtful,
practiced approach to labor. Emerson expands on existing republican ideals, showing the
ways that education and innovation can nuance U.S. economic values in order to foster
“civil advancement” and national wealth. These new principles challenge the old ones
and gauge a citizen’s investment in his nation by his ability to innovate and use his
intellect, not simply his willingness to work.
Emerson’s reprioritization of the values of republicanism emphasizes the potential of commerce and industrialization; however, it also restructures the populace’s access to economic success. Emerson explains in “Wealth” that “[c]ommerce is a game of skill, which every man cannot play, which few men can play well. The right merchant is one who has the just average of faculties we call common sense; a man of a strong affinity for facts, who makes up his decision on what he has seen. … There is always a reason, in the man, for his good or bad fortune, and so, in making money” (628). A man’s ability to earn in a commercial economy depends upon his “common sense” and “affinity for the facts,” qualities that reiterate Emerson’s emphasis on education as a republican value. However, all educated citizens are not privy to capitalize on a commercial economy: its profits are available to only a “few men” or even just “the right merchant.” The somewhat paradoxical consequence of expanding American republicanism to accommodate for new economic forms is that it actually limits access to “good fortune” and “making money.” Simply put, commerce creates new layers of class stratification in the U.S. economy because it allows for some to dominate and achieve financial success but it does not provide those opportunities for all.

Even as he publicly alters his perspective on national economic forms in light of his vehement call for abolition, Emerson does not endorse commerce and industrialization without scrutiny: “The crime which bankrupts men and states is job-work—declining from your main design, to serve a turn here or there. Nothing is beneath you, if it is in the direction of your life; nothing is great or desirable if it is off from that” (“Wealth” 635). When considered alongside his earlier statement that only a “few men” are able to “play” the commerce game “well,” Emerson’s concerns about “job-work” and
an individual’s “direction” in life take on nuanced significance. The assumption that
“nothing is beneath” a worker unless it departs from the “direction of [one’s] life” puts
forth a loaded ideal, namely that everyone’s life has a designated purpose and that work
outside of that path has less value. Emerson does not state how this direction is
determined, but thinking along these lines could easily establish a rigid professional
system within which only a few are able to profit from commerce and everyone else must
be content with their calling. An economy based on these premises leads to a stratified
class structure that perpetuates itself by allowing a powerful few to control the
mechanisms of trade and production and employing the majority of the populace solely
as workers. Emerson openly espoused social class stratification and in a select few
leading the masses, and as he adapted the tenets of American republicanism to fit new
economic forms, he finds benefit in the ways a commercial class will transform the
nation’s sociopolitical system.

Emerson was moved by the progression of the Civil War to write “American
Civilization,” which he published in 1862 in The Atlantic Monthly, one of the most
popular American periodicals at the time (Robinson 158). Amidst the turmoil of Southern
secession and the massive consolidation of federal power when the Northern government
assumed regulatory control over the economy and created a national currency and
banking system, Emerson returns to and rethinks interpretations of Charles Montesquieu,
whose Enlightenment philosophies formed the basis for American political and economic
republicanism’s celebration of individualism and representative democracy (Malachuk
406). To fully adapt republican values to fit a commercial economy, the economic logics
that connected property ownership, land cultivation, and individualism to virtue needed
to become secondary; therefore, Emerson gives new context to republican values by aligning them with cooperative labor and a desire to contribute rather than individuate:

Morality is essential, and all incidents of morality,—as justice to the subject, and personal liberty. Montesquieu says,—‘countries are well cultivated, not as they are fertile, but as they are free’; and the remark holds not less, but more, true of the culture of men than of the tillage of land. And the highest proof of civility is, that the whole public action of the State is directed on securing the greatest good for the greatest number (Emerson, “American Civilization” 168).

Morality, justice, liberty, and freedom are to be prized; Emerson uses Montesquieu’s language associated with an agrarian economy—a “well-cultivated” country is not dependent upon being “fertile” but upon being “free”—to suggest that the “tillage of land” is less important than “the culture of men.” Labor and land ownership no longer serve as “the highest proof of civility,” thereby removing the privilege associated with the independent man whose virtue is disseminated through his hard work. Instead, “the whole of public action” should be focused on “securing the greatest good for the greatest number,” emphasizing the populace’s collective power in a way that rewrites how American potential is fulfilled. This new vision is of a national conglomerate that de-individuates and harnesses the labor of many to showcase its power, a inverse of political and economic republicanism’s belief that the virtuous, educated individuals would cultivate and produce a strong, wealthy polity.

Emerson’s “American Civilization” reconceives the premises behind political and economic republicanism in light of the labor conditions that led to disunion and Civil
War, and within the essay, he concludes that emancipation will be the catalytic force for social reform. Ultimately, Emerson argues for emancipation to “[alter] the atomic social constitution of the Southern people.” He sees this change in the populace’s “constitution” as motivating an economic conversion, where “interest will be to let it in, to get the best labor, and, if they fear their blacks, to invite Irish, German, and American laborers. Thus whilst Slavery makes and keeps disunion, Emancipation removes the whole objection to union. Emancipation at one stroke elevates the poor white of the South, and identifies his interest with that of the Northern laborer” (Emerson, “American Civilization” 174). The Southern “poor white’s” financial position was compromised by the availability of “free” black labor, and uniting his interest with that of the Northern worker increases their collective power while also homogenizing the workforce. Employers benefit from such a change because they “get the best labor” while treating workers as though they have indistinguishable interests and investments. There are costs and consequences to this model: although beneficial to employers, expanding the labor market puts all workers in competition by giving them the same “interest.” Emerson’s emancipation argument relies on the familiarity of republican principles, namely that the nation is made stronger when the populace is invested in its economic potential; however, he blurs the lines between investment and participation in order to usher in a new economic model and role for America’s laboring masses.

Emerson began his 1863 speech, “Fortune of the Republic,” with a truism that reminded his audience that emancipation was not only a moral victory but also an indication of industrialism’s expanding influence. He states, “It is a rule that holds in economy as well as in hydraulics, that you must have a source higher than your tap”
(Emerson, “Fortune” 187). Here, Emerson references hydraulic technology that was as influential to the evolution of industrialism in England as Eli Whitney’s cotton gin was to American large-scale agrarianism (Skempton 71). This brief bit of prescriptive guidance resembles the lists of maxims that Benjamin Franklin shared in *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, a genre that would have been familiar to Emerson’s readers. An easy inversion transforms Emerson’s allusion to a “source higher” into a platitude about a higher source, thereby suggesting that economic common sense dependent upon a more knowing, guiding hand. To explain, Emerson lists institutions that practice this philosophy: “The mills, the shops, the theatre, the caucus, the college, and the church have all found out this secret,” and provides examples of how one man’s technological invention and innovation, say Newton’s chronometer, benefits a host of others in the economy, like sailors, merchants, and Parliament (“Fortune” 187). Emerson lauds these commercial, sociocultural, and political institutions for their structure, a top-down class system that provides source material or the fodder for systemic evolution along with engaging collective, aggregate labor. Following Emerson’s logic, emancipation would necessarily improve society because the newly minted members of the working class would be guided by intellectual elites who could introduce them to new ideas, the value of education, and a stronger moral code. However, this belief that the knowledge and morality of the elite would lead them to act in ways that would gradually benefit the populace as a whole is paternalistic and optimistic at best. Even as Emerson became more politically active and invested in advocating for social reform that seeks opportunity and freedom for all members of American society, he remains committed to preserving the power of a privileged group of individuals, who were assumed to be intellectuals.
Emerson ultimately believed in the expansion of a universal moral code that would enable the American populace as a whole to act individualistically while still contributing to the progress and evolution of society. These ideals are expansive and can be interpreted in a host of ways, a feature of Emerson’s philosophy that enabled him to change the economic terms of republicanism. However, this mutability also helped to justify the expansion of the working class and the exploitation of the laboring masses. When Emerson’s adaptations to republicanism are presented as a rhetorical catalyst that encouraged commercial industrialism as a counterforce to slavery, then his works exemplify how moral virtue became associated with labor that, at the level of the aggregate, contributed to production and technological advances. This economic form was superior because it exemplified intelligence and independence through invention and it shattered a dependence on immoral labor practices.

***

Emerson’s subtle adaptations of the principles of American republicanism in his popular writings and public lectures reveal not only his engagement with the sociopolitical problems and events of his day but also his prescience. By placing Emerson’s writings within the context of economic republicanism, these works represent another rhetorical argument against the link between land and virtue. Moreover, Emerson’s somewhat reluctant endorsement of commerce and industrialism reveals the somewhat paradoxical logic that literary writers engaged by incorporating the familiarity of republican principles in their works. Over the course of his works, Emerson developed a compelling argument for the potential of a commercial, industrial economy in the United States. Although he remained a reticent supporter of laissez-faire capitalism, his
abolitionist advocacy suggests that he understood the importance of transforming the public’s perception of economic value and moral virtue to eradicating slavery. Emerson strove to write his evolving explorations of America’s morality and the nation’s economic practices to be instructional, like Franklin, Cooper, and so many other writers before him. These tracts and speeches are rhetorically complex, asking readers and audience members to challenge and confirm their own assumptions and conclusions. By working with his public and consistently returning to and rethinking the economic values of republicanism, Emerson made his somewhat elitist and highbrow philosophy approachable and continued the long tradition of American writers transforming commerce and industrial production into a moral endeavor.

Works Cited


CODA:

A Narrative Interrupted: The South and American Economic Republicanism

Southern writer Nathaniel Beverly Tucker’s *The Partisan Leader* was published in 1836, but the author insisted it be given a copyright date of 1856. Tucker’s narrative ends abruptly, presumably because although he could anticipate the likelihood of Southern secession, he could not anticipate its outcome. Tucker concludes by stating, “I have been interrupted in my narrative. I have hesitated whether to give this fragment to the public, until I have leisure to complete my history. On further reflection, I have determined it so. Let it go forth as the first *Bulletin* of that gallant contest, in which Virginia achieved her independence” (273). This text is a romantic projection that looks forward to an independent Virginia and the South’s secession, but it is also surprisingly candid about the potential issues facing the South after secession. Set in 1849 Virginia during the fourth term of President Martin Van Buren, *The Partisan Leader* foreshadows a rich, agrarian state faltering under the control of an oppressive Northern government and a family separated by political allegiances. The novel concludes with Virginia in the throes of secession and the Trevor family somewhat reunited, but it does not necessarily paint a happy portrait of the outcome of national disunion. Tucker was an avid secessionist and prescient about the eventual Civil War, but he was also all too well aware of the economic hardships accompanying withdrawal from the union.

*The Partisan Leader* provides a glimpse into the South’s, specifically Virginia’s, understanding of the changing terms of economic republicanism. Like Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Tucker’s novel emphasizes Virginia’s economic strength, natural resources, and the moral character of its people, suggesting,
like Jefferson, that Virginia stands as an ideal model of governance and fiscal strength. Despite Tucker’s regional patriotism, his assessments of the Southern economy and the South’s ability to succeed as an autonomous entity were not optimistic. Along with championing the Southern right to secede, Tucker also engages with and challenges republicanism’s changing measures of virtue thereby using these tenets to promote national instability. Specifically, Tucker’s novel targets the U.S.’s turn towards commerce and international trade and highlights the ways agrarian states, like Virginia, were perceived as excluded from national economic agendas. Arguably, this perception that the South’s agrarian contributions are omitted from discussions about the early and antebellum American economy is not entirely false nor has it been rectified. Literary scholars, like Jennifer J. Baker, Ian Baucom, Stephen Shapiro, and Eric Wertheimer, have tracked the American novel’s attention to and investment in the evolution of commerce in the United States, yet in order to make these arguments, these studies perpetuate the idea that the American turn towards commerce and industrialism was somewhat of a foregone conclusion.26 For Southerners, like Tucker, excluding large plantations and natural resource production as an integral facet of the antebellum U.S.’s economic landscape would have appeared to tell only half the story of America’s transition from agrarian to commercial republicanism. By briefly engaging with Tucker’s text, “Novel Economies”

---

26 To explain further, Baker argues that early American economic thinkers and writers believed the early republic was a “fertile ground for financial venture and a place that would attract those looking to use debt to exceed the limits of their own capital” (5). Shapiro sees the early American novel as already invested in the middle-class interests of a circumatlantic global system that transformed the United States into a “re-export republic,” an assessment that focuses on the U.S.’s demand for commodities and the mercantile trade that profited from its natural resource production (4-5). Similarly, Baucom also turns to the circumatlantic commercial and slave trade to explain how financial modes of speculation and abstract, mobile property evolved to transform personhood, sovereign power, and social relations (65-72). Likewise, Wertheimer looks at the abstract business of insurance underwriting and property conservation as a cornerstone of both commercial, capitalist logic and also literary culture, suggesting that both discourses define modes of loss and reparation in profitable and pleasurable ways (8-17).
shows that the rhetorical strategies of republican agrarianism and industrial capitalism are neither diametrically opposed nor independently sequential. Thereby, highlighting the ways that American literature established a link between profit, patriotism, and virtue and ultimately, facilitated the United States’ eventual industrialization.

Tucker dedicates his narrative to the people of Virginia, celebrating the people of his state as though they have achieved independence. He describes the men and women of Virginia as embodying the virtues of republicanism but also distinguishes them from those ideals: “They belong to that class, peculiar to a society whose institutions are based on domestic slavery; the honest, bravo, hardy, and high-spirited peasantry of Virginia. Among them, I saw examples of simple virtue and instinctive patriotism” (Tucker xiv). Virginians are a distinct group of Americans because they own slaves and exemplify “virtue and instinctive patriotism,” suggesting that an individual’s virtue and investment in his country is not necessarily linked to his labor. By referring to the Virginians as “peasantry,” Tucker asserts that Southerners who owned slaves were of the same social class as the idealized republican small-land owners and agricultural workers, and also, subtly suggests that although Virginians do not labor themselves, they still contribute value and virtue to the benefit of the nation.

However, Virginians do not necessarily aspire to the venerated republican type; instead of privileging education and hard work, they share “lessons of that untaught wisdom, which finds its place in minds uncorrupted by artificial systems of education, and undebased by abject and menial occupations” (Tucker xiv). If labor and education were supposed to ensure that a populace was virtuous and invested in the nation’s future, then Tucker’s praise of Virginians for eschewing republicanism’s proscribed path
insinuates that this sociopolitical and economic ideology is lacking. Tucker takes up the themes of republicanism because they resonate with his reading public, but he also challenges and adapts these ideas in order to encourage readers to consider the social, economic, and political alternatives to this rhetoric.

When *The Partisan Leader* is read in the context of Franklin’s populationist economic theory, Tucker’s description of the state’s population and visible means of production indicates its economic deficiencies. The narrative begins with a soldier surveying the Virginia landscape:

> A glance of the eye took in the whole of the little settlement that lined its banks, and measured the resources of its inhabitants. The different tenements were so near to each other as to allow but a small patch of arable land to each. . . Of trade there could be none. . . . Indeed, the appearance of discomfort and poverty in every dwelling well accorded with the scanty territory belonging to each. . . But, though the valley thus bore the marks of a crowded population, . . . The visible signs of life were few (1-3).

The small homes with “a small patch of arable land” in a “valley [that] bore marks of a crowded population” should be the picturesque seat of natural resource production and economic vitality, according to the logics of republican economics. Yet, there exists “the appearance of discomfort and poverty in every dwelling,” and this small community’s impoverishment is not only due to “the scanty territory belonging to each” but also a lack of “trade” in the area. Virginia’s small farmers are failing in what should be a lush, fertile area, suggesting one of two economic conclusions: either that this way of life is
outmoded, as implied by the lack of trade, or that small-scale natural resource production is no longer a viable way to make a living in America’s changing economy. Tucker does not go so far as to endorse large-scale resource production as the sole means for economic success in this changing fiscal climate, but he does argue that Virginia should secede on the basis of its isolation from the rest of the U.S. economy. Beyond noting The Partisan Leader’s foresight in predicting some of the financial circumstances that would cause the South to falter during the Civil War,27 this passage reveals that even in making a case for secession, Tucker must utilize the familiar rhetoric and ideals of republicanism.

Tucker’s text anticipates the economic factors that actually did motivate the South to leave the Union. One of the primary catalysts put forth by the men fighting for Virginia’s secession in The Partisan Leader is economic fairness. Tucker’s narrative details a long conversation between Douglas Trevor, the hero of the story and the man responsible for “the destiny of Virginia,” and B—, an unnamed force behind Virginia’s withdrawal from the Union. B— argues that, “[Northerners] wanted nothing but a monopoly of the southern market to enable them to enrich themselves” (Tucker 170). B—’s argument is not very specific; his complaint could indicate that the North wants to monopolize the Southern market by not allowing the South to create their own manufactured goods, or he could be suggesting that the North wants a monopoly on buying the natural resources produced by the South in order to then process those materials for their own commercial gain. Either of these arguments would be familiar to

27 From the start of the Civil War, the South, in terms of population, financial solvency and leadership, was at a significant disadvantage. The South’s financial problems were exacerbated by infighting within the Confederate government over economic planning. The plantation owners who comprised the Confederate Congress refused to enact strict measures of taxation, conscription, or impressment, which would have counterbalanced some of the resource disparity between the North and the South. As the war progressed and the South began to lose ground, some congressmen proposed initiating taxes or a draft, but these men represented districts that were about to be invaded or taken by Union forces (Ball 24, 6-10).
Tucker’s readers, as the American colonists voiced similar objections to British rule and used their economic disenfranchisement as a reason for revolution.

Moreover, B—’s arguments engage with the shifting priorities of republican economics, cataloguing the ways that the North’s turn towards industrial production and commercial trade has impacted the South’s economy. Even though land remains valuable, it is now also exploitable as a taxable commodity. According to B—, financial stratification in the United States is the result of “a trade perfectly free, totally discharged from all duties, would certainly be best for all. But revenue must be had, and the impost is the best source of revenue. . . . These States were first driven to think of separation by a tariff of protection. Their federal constitution guards against it by express prohibition, and by requiring that the impost, like the tax laws of Virginia, should be annual” (251). Here, B— addresses a host of complicated and intertwined federal economic issues; the crux of his argument is that states, like Virginia, that are primarily land owning, producers of agrarian goods are unfairly penalized by tax laws in contrast to other states that are more commercial and mercantile and therefore, earn untaxed revenue because of free trade laws. B—’s grievance illustrates a portion of the debate over federal vs. state control over issues like taxation and free trade. If the state governments had been allowed to determine “the best source of revenue” for their needs and the best means to secure it instead of the “federal constitution,” then the tax penalties between Virginia’s “annual” “impost” and “a trade perfectly free” might not be so disparate. This argument mirrors contemporaneous debates over slavery, where proslavery states advocated that the federal government should not be able to regulate or legislate in ways that disproportionately impacts certain state economies.
*Partisan Leader* culminates with a battle between Douglas Trevor’s Virginia troops and his older brother Owen Trevor’s U.S. troops, and it anticipates both the strengths and the weaknesses of a less cash flush and less populated South trying to take on the wealthy, more densely populated North. Douglas’s troops are small in number and hastily trained. Although Douglas’ troops are initially successful, Owen has the means and ability to regroup his forces, plan a counter-attack, and capture his brother. The novel cuts off as Douglas Trevor is presented as a prisoner of war to President Van Buren, and its epic battle scene and tragic ending suggest that Southern secessionists must consider the fundamental needs of warfare before answering a battle cry (Tucker 259-61, 273). This conclusion leaves the reader wondering, why Tucker, in his propagandistic call for secession, would leave the text open to a conclusion that seems to expect the battle for Virginia’s independence to favor the North? Arguably, Tucker anticipates the need for the preparatory work of secession to begin early, and he uses his novel to incite action. He assumes that civil war is the only way to resolve the conflict over slavery; however, Tucker also takes seriously the potential economic, production, and population problems that face the South in that attempt. Albeit a somewhat biased and anticipatory exploration of Virginia’s and the South’s autonomous potential, Tucker’s *The Partisan Leader* elucidates how entrenched republican ideals were within America’s political, economic, and literary culture. Despite Tucker’s critiques of values that link virtue to certain types of labor, educational standards, and progressive models, he still relies on those fundamental republican tenets to forge a case for secession, just as the American revolutionaries did only sixty years prior.
By highlighting the expansiveness of republicanism, “Novel Economies” has aimed to demonstrate the many ways literary authors and texts use this philosophical approach to political economy to engage with and challenge public policy, approaches to public education, voting rights, and moral virtue. Although the work of historians such as J.G.A. Pocock, Joyce Appleby, and Drew R. McCoy and American Studies scholar Wil Verhoeven has called attention to the influence republican ideology had on early American thought and economic forms, this dissertation’s analysis of the mutually enabling relationship between literature and economics, read through the lens of republicanism, encourages further conversation, asking how these values and ideals continue to resonate and direct the populace’s understanding of economics today? To answer this question, scholars, writers, public officials, and citizens must think more deeply about the foundational values and profit motives that drive the patriotic underpinnings of our economy, and they must also evaluate and challenge the narrative and philosophical sources catalyzing those values.

Works Cited


Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of


CONCLUSION:

21st Century Novel Economies: Republican Resonances

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton: An American Musical* debuted on Broadway in 2015 and captured national attention immediately. Not only did the musical win eleven Tony awards the year it opened, but its influence has been credited with preserving Alexander Hamilton’s prestige as the face of the ten dollar bill (Paulson C1; Calmes A11). The musical pairs Hamilton’s life, the quintessential “bootstrap narrative” of immigration to the United States, with contemporary, pop music styles and a cast that more closely resembles the makeup of the nation’s diverse populace than that of the Founding Fathers (Brantley C1). Hamilton, the man, has enjoyed moments of posthumous popularity prior to being immortalized in a play; he has been celebrated as “the creator of modern capitalism and the first American businessman” and, according to President Theodore Roosevelt, he was “the most brilliant American statesman who ever lived” (Ferling xi-xii). *Hamilton* the musical deftly explores the ways Hamilton the statesman’s views on political economy helped to shape the United States’ approach to federal governance and national economic agendas. Although the musical relies on its contemporary perspective to present history in a way that resonates with an American audience over two hundred years later, its reception and connection to today’s sociopolitical climate demonstrates the ongoing relationship between narrative and changing economic forms.

Although Hamilton’s vision for a powerful, federal economy is a hallmark of his political career, this aspect of his life is not the musical’s primary focus. However, at one point in the play, Miranda stages a fight between Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson over
taxation, illustrating the Founding Fathers’ debates over the best economic approach to national progress. This debate uses rhetoric that echoes contemporary perceptions of the ideals and problems with the American economy. Jefferson celebrates the resourceful, self-sufficiency of an agrarian economy while lambasting the complexity of a large-scale taxation system needed to support national debt and infrastructure: “If New York’s in debt – why should Virginia bear it? Uh! Our debts are paid, I’m afraid. . . . In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground. We create. You just wanna move our money around. This financial plan is an outrageous demand, and its too many damn pages for any man to understand” (Hamilton Act II: 2). The question of why one party should pay for another’s debts is a common feature of U.S. politics as is the fear that the government is mismanaging the taxes it collects or constructing an overly complicated bureaucracy. Jefferson touts the success of early America’s agrarian economy and assumes it will remain the nation’s stable, lucrative source of revenue, and in so doing, he also critiques abstract financial models that “move money around” and are not rooted in concrete modes of production.

Hamilton’s response is biting, attacking Jefferson’s economic ideas and his commitment to agrarianism: “If we assume the debts, the union gets a new line of credit, a financial diuretic. How do you not get it? If we’re aggressive and competitive the union gets a boost. You’d rather give it sedative? A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor, your debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor” (Hamilton Act II: 2). Miranda masterfully summarizes the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican debates that occurred as the nation solidified both its political and economic systems. This critique of Jefferson gets at the heart of the ways in which economic republicanism is conflated with political
republican philosophy. Hamilton’s plan to make the young U.S. “competitive” by “assum[ing] . . . debts” and obtaining “a new line of credit,” directly contrasts with the republican ideal that land and resource production would make the nation’s economy stable and therefore, competitive on the global market. Moreover, by belittling Jefferson’s “civics lesson from a slaver,” Hamilton marks the insurmountable break between the ideals of agrarian republicanism and the realities of how it is practiced, and he directly ties that breach to Jefferson’s personal source of financial success. What distinguishes Miranda’s version of Hamilton’s argument as anachronistic is his use of economic logics to attack slavery. If Miranda’s audience was somewhat swayed by Jefferson’s claims, labeling him as a “slaver” and connecting him to that system of antiquated barbarity should clarify that Hamilton’s economic plan is on the “right side of history.” Just as eighteenth and nineteenth century writers critiqued and challenged the virtues of certain economic forms using literary conceits familiar to their readers, Miranda’s musical retelling of Hamilton’s life story interjects moments of historical hindsight and reminds its contemporary audience of the role public perception played in defining the economy’s governing principles.

In examining the ways public perception of republican virtue facilitated economic agendas, “Novel Economies” has illustrated the mutually enabling relationship between literary works and large-scale economic change. Where scholars of American literature have tended to assume narrative simply records reactions to economic change, this project has shown how literature delivered messages to readers about political economy that helped to change public perceptions of republican virtue. Literature has catalogued and adapted the ideals that defined economic production as the measure of a citizen’s
commitment to his nation’s stability. By accounting for the ways literary texts influenced the public’s perception of the nation’s economic agendas, we can come to recognize the dynamic collaboration between the populace’s political power and their understanding of large-scale economic change.

“Novel Economies” has shown the ways that narrative not only tracks but also influences the populace’s understanding of and connection to national political economy agendas, and in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, these themes have reappeared as journalists and political scientists discuss the power that rhetoric and stories had in connecting the economic concerns of Donald Trump’s voters to his ticket. During his presidential campaign, Trump argued that his success as a real estate mogul, entrepreneur, and boardroom negotiator would “Make America Great Again,” promising a jobs agenda “guided by the principles to buy American and hire American” (“Made in the USA”). Trump returns to the idea that the United States as a collective whole has the power to enable its own global greatness, and these ideas echo the principles of early American republicanism, envisioning that national strength and stability are produced by isolated, economic self-sufficiency. In contrast to these claims, 370 prominent U.S economists, including eight Nobel Prize winners, publicly denounced Trump’s economic plan in a letter that catalogued the ways that Trump “misleads” voters and concluded with the assertion that Trump’s campaign “promotes a willful delusion over engagement with reality.” These harsh critiques condemn Trump’s economic agendas as “destructive” fiction, implying the candidate’s willingness to manipulate the expanses of narrative license to appeal to voters (“Economists Against Trump”). However, his proposals did resonate with voters, especially those whose “jobs are vulnerable to outsourcing or
automation. . . Trump performed especially strongly among voters without a college degree – an important indicator of social status but also of economic prospects . . . [and] significantly outperformed Romney in counties where residents had lower credit scores and in counties where more men have stopped working” (Casselman). The hypothetical promise to once again participate in the American economy attracted voters who felt excluded from the nation’s prosperity and progress (Porter B1). Although many aspects of the U.S. economy are quite different than when the founding fathers made proclamations somewhat similar to Trump, this anecdote, like Miranda’s reimagined debate between Hamilton and Jefferson, illustrates the ways that narratives of personal, economic success or disenfranchisement connect to political philosophies and ideals and help to shape large-scale economic change.

By tracing the evolution of early America’s economic republican ideals from Benjamin Franklin’s belles lettres to James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romances and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings and public lectures, “Novel Economies” demonstrates the diverse ways in which popular authors directly challenged and wove contemporary political economy agendas into their works. And, as suggested by this project’s turn to the memoirs of Stephen Burroughs and the sentimental fiction of Martha Meredith Read and Sarah Savage, other writers adopted the technique of addressing republican values to directly comment upon the economic wellbeing of the nation and its citizens. Moreover, Southern writer Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, featured as the final analysis of this project, also focuses on the changing economic values of American republicanism to make his political arguments in favor of the South seceding from the republic. “Novel Economies” shows the confluence of authors and genres that engage with the values of republican
political economy, and reveals the ways literature enabled and adapted the U.S.’s turn towards a commercial, industrial economy. By the same token, it also demonstrates how access to a commercial, industrial economy was integral to fostering a national literary culture in the United States. When the mutually enabling relationship between literature and economic change is traced from the early Republic to the Civil War, it elucidates the integral role that American authors played in expanding the nation’s understanding of productive labor and modes of production.

“Novel Economies” illustrates the ways that literary writing, from Benjamin Franklin’s aphorisms and imaginative writings to James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romances and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s political, public lectures, engaged with and adapted American economic agendas. This project reframes the focus of American republican values to show the ways the political philosophy was embedded within and influenced by national economic practices, revealing how republican narratives influenced the ways Americans understood their roles as workers, producers, and consumers. Consequently, “Novel Economies” provides an expansive look at the narratives and ideals that affected the ways that Americans thought about their productive virtue and the nation’s economic strength. By understanding the elevated impact that narrative has on the populace’s relationship to large-scale economic change, this project prompts future inquiry into and challenges of the role that literature and rhetoric have and play in shaping national political economy policy.

Works Cited


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Casselman, Ben. “Story Saying Trump’s Win Had Nothing To Do With Economics.”


Accessed 1.5.2014


Madden, Etta. “‘To make a Figure’: Benjamin Rush’s Rhetorical Self-Construction and Scientific Authorship.” *Early American Literature* 41:2 (2006) 241-272.


Tennenhouse, Leonard. *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the


