

Rattlesnakes in the Garden

The Fascinating Serpents of the Early, Edenic Republic

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ABSTRACT This essay considers the various ways in which writers and visual artists deployed the rattlesnake to advance and, later, destabilize nationalist agendas between the French and Indian War and the Civil War. During the intervening century the rattlesnake, with its powers of fascination, evolved into a multifaceted symbol used to represent a wide range of ideas: British colonial unity; American national identity; white fears of interracial conflict and miscegenation; and the lingering belief that original sin represented a serious threat to a secular republic whose well-being could be ensured only by the virtuous behavior of its citizens. Between 1751 and 1861 visual artists like Benjamin Franklin and Charles Gadsden, together with writers such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Oliver Wendell Holmes, made the rattlesnake a symbol of the national transition from imported art to endogenous culture, from indigenous inhabitants to European emigrants, from innocence to experience.

When John Smith explored and named New England, he described Massachusetts Bay as the “Paradise of all those parts” and exhorted prospective immigrants to imitate “Adam and Eve [who] did first beginne this innocent worke, To plant the earth.”¹ The Puritans who succeeded Smith at Massachusetts Bay certainly embraced the Edenic overtones of their colonial enterprise, but they also detected an unruliness in the landscape

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1. John Smith, “A Description of New England,” in *Captain John Smith: Writings with Other Narratives of Roanoke, Jamestown, and the First English Settlement of America*, ed. James Horn (New York: Library of America, 2007), 149, 170.

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and its native inhabitants that threatened to transform this New World paradise into a dark and dreadful wilderness.² As illness, warfare, religious dissension, and the vanities of commerce destabilized Puritan ideals, men like Cotton Mather blamed the devil for disrupting their “innocent worke” and alleged that Satan’s minions were seeking to overthrow the kingdom of God in New England just as the serpent had ruined Eden. Only the purity of New England’s ordinances, Mather argued, kept the devil at bay; baptism “stands to keep the vilest *Witches* out of Paradise” and preserved New England’s Edenic character.³ Holy ordinances—and the wholesale slaughter of “*Witches*”—may have served to keep the devil out of the Puritans’ New England paradise, but nothing could keep the snakes away.

Men and women of the early modern period feared witches because they possessed the power of the “evil eye,” an ability to paralyze any individual they looked at and control him or her like a puppet. As Enlightenment rationality—and Robert Calef’s *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700)—gradually exposed the folly of Mather’s Puritan superstitions, colonial fears of witchcraft and the fascinating evil eye began to abate, but in the early eighteenth century several scientifically minded colonists reported to the Royal Society in London that they had observed a natural analogue to this supernatural phenomenon: rattlesnakes, they claimed, could use their eyes to captivate and control birds, small animals, and even children. Herbert Leventhal argues that this colonial credence in the fascinating powers of rattlesnakes probably emerged from the belief of Cherokee, Delaware, and Creek Indians, among others, “in certain mythical serpents—not the common everyday variety of rattlesnake or blacksnake which one could find in the woods—which possessed a power very similar to that of fascination.”⁴ Native American legends suggested that women were particularly susceptible to this power, a point made by the Algonquin tale “of a woman who fell in love with Atosis the Serpent while he was in human form. ‘One day

2. See my essay “Building Bensalem at Massachusetts Bay: Francis Bacon and the Wisdom of Eden in Early Modern New England,” *New England Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2010): 577–606.

3. Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts* (Boston: R.P., 1689), 33.

4. Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 163–66. On the colonial belief in serpent fascination, see Richard M. Hurst, “Snakelore Motifs in the Writings of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Other Colonial Writers,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 9, nos. 3–4 (1983): 68–77.

while the woman cut away the ice, she saw in the water a bright pair of eyes looking steadily at her. They charmed her so that she could not move.' Eventually, it was said, she gave birth to blacksnakes!"⁵ Because of legends like these, white inhabitants of North America consistently associated rattlesnake fascination with Native Americans, even if they did not believe in the phenomenon. When De Witt Clinton proposed in 1815 that "the fascination of serpents, should be banished from our natural, and the Welch tribes of Indians from our civil, history," he preserved that connection between fascination and Indians even as he tried to erode popular faith in rattlesnake fascination and expurgate certain nations of Native Americans from United States history.⁶

For politicians like De Witt Clinton who devoted their lives to establishing and legitimizing republican government in the United States, eradicating a prevalent belief in the mythical powers of rattlesnakes was, arguably, an important enterprise; so many associated the nascent United States with a second Eden that a concurrent belief in the ruinous and supernatural powers of the indigenous rattlesnake might have encouraged some of their constituents to forecast a second Fall. Paradisiacal descriptions of the United States filled the novels and newspapers of the early American republic. In *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), William Hill Brown recounted the tale of Henry, who "saved all his little stock of money to begin the world by himself" like Adam but who discovers, like Adam, that his beloved has been transported by the deceit of a being outside his society. In Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824), the villages of Naumkeak and Plymouth constitute "a perfect Eden of fruit and flowers" carved from the wild expanse of untamed nature, and not only are women responsible for "that great tree of sin planted by Eve; but I say they are the individual cause of every branch and bud from that day downwards." In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Phoebe Pyncheon, like Eve, spends her time in a garden with a "rose-bush [that] looked as if it had been brought from Eden that very summer, together with the mould in which it grew."⁷

5. Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*, 165.

6. De Witt Clinton, "Ornithology," *Newport Mercury*, September 30, 1815, 1. For a speculative history of the possibility that groups of Welsh settlers colonized North America before Columbus's discovery and intermarried with Native Americans, see William L. Traxel, *Footprints of the Welsh Indians* (New York: Algora, 2004).

7. William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, issued with Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette*, ed. Carla Mulford (1789; 1797; repr., New York: Penguin, 1996), 50; Lydia Maria Child, *Hobomok*, ed. Carolyn L. Karcher (1824; repr., New

Given the Puritan legacy of paradisiacal thought and the extent to which the images and themes of Eden pervade the work of early republican writers, critics might be excused if they take the presence of such language for granted. Discussing Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, for instance, Judith Fetterly asserts that "Sedgwick positions Hope as the original American, Eve preceding Adam in the garden."⁸ Fetterly makes the assertion without citing a single instance in which Sedgwick either described the New World as Edenic or referred to Hope in terms reminiscent of Eve, but this apparent omission of evidence passes largely unnoticed because novelists and critics alike consistently refer to colonial America and the early republic as a second Eden without identifying specific connections between the two spaces—and the snakes that infested each.

As an unintended consequence of assuming but not documenting perceived parallels between Eden and the early republic, critics have often occluded the ways in which white writers appropriated Native American beliefs regarding the rattlesnake into their understanding of the nation as a nascent paradise. The rattlesnake was made into a symbol of white colonial unity and the Edenic nation-state;⁹ it emblemized colonial discontent with British rule and a collective opposition to the policies and enemies that threatened American interests. White colonists made the rattlesnake the foremost symbol of their Edenic union during the Revolution, and it remained an official emblem of the United States throughout the nineteenth century. But as soon as they had won the war, U.S. citizens began to describe national policies and cultural realities with which they were discontented as dangers that could, like the fascinating gaze of a rattlesnake, immobilize and destroy the Edenic nation.¹⁰ Popular rhetoric after the

Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 1, 25; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851; repr., New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 68.

8. Judith Fetterly, "My Sister! My Sister!": The Rhetoric of Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 497.

9. In Native American legends, the serpent was closely associated with the earth, while the eagle naturally represented the sky; colonists adopted both halves of this twinned pair as representations of the new nation-state.

10. The rattlesnake's dual significance—as the symbol of a vibrant colonial unity and, potentially, the destruction of that union—seems particularly appropriate given the Puritan investment in biblical typology. Puritans frequently self-identified with Israel, and under Moses the tribal nation suffered from an infestation of "fiery serpents" sent by God to plague the people. These serpents signified certain death until God commanded Israel to "make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live." If Timothy Dwight or some other descendant of Jonathan Edwards had taken time

American Revolution used the rattlesnake and serpentine fascination as metaphors for a wide variety of subversive forces that threatened the nation, especially the dangers associated with racial diversity and religious declension.

Despite the rattlesnake's symbolic centrality in early American society, no study of its cultural significance has ever appeared. This essay seeks to address that lacuna by considering the various ways in which writers and visual artists deployed the rattlesnake to advance and, later, destabilize nationalist agendas between the French and Indian War and the Civil War. During the intervening century the rattlesnake, with its powers of fascination, evolved into a multifaceted symbol used to represent a wide range of ideas: British colonial unity; American national identity; white fears of interracial conflict and miscegenation; and the lingering belief that original sin represented a serious threat to a secular republic whose well-being could be ensured only by the virtuous behavior of its citizens. Between 1751 and 1861 visual artists like Benjamin Franklin and Charles Gadsden, together with writers such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Oliver Wendell Holmes, made the rattlesnake a symbol of the national transition from indigenous inhabitants to European emigrants, from imported art to endogenous culture, from innocence to experience.

AN INDIGENOUS EMBLEM OF UNITY

Links between fascinating serpents and peoples native to North America made the rattlesnake a natural symbol for colonial rebels, struggling to differentiate themselves from their European past, to appropriate, and the rattlesnake first appeared as an emblem of colonial unity in the editorial writings of Benjamin Franklin during the 1750s. In reaction to the news that Samuel Saunders, a felon transported from the British isles to the colonies for earlier crimes, had committed murder in North America, Franklin complained about the practice of criminal transportation by paraphrasing the Bible: "We do not ask Fish, but thou givest us *Serpents*, and worse than Serpents!"¹¹ A month later, in May 1751, Franklin suggested that the

to assess the two very different purposes for which citizens of the early republic used the rattlesnake as a symbol, I suspect that he would have seen this as yet another way in which typology forecast the destiny of the United States. See Numbers 21:4–9.

11. Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (New York: Library of America, 1987), 358. Franklin here paraphrased the words of Christ in Matthew 7:9–10, where Jesus asks, "Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?" Franklin's message is clear: the colonies had not asked for Britain's aid, much less its interference, and the British excuse for transportation—the "Improve-

colonies should jointly oppose this unjust practice, proposing that the colonies, in return for Britain's convicts, export rattlesnakes to the mother country: "In some of the uninhabited Parts of these Provinces, there are Numbers of these venomous Reptiles we call RATTLE-SNAKES; Felons-convict from the Beginning of the World: These, whenever we meet with them, we put to Death, by Virtue of an old Law, *Thou shalt bruise his Head*. But as this is a sanguinary law, and may seem too cruel; and as however mischievous those Creatures are with us, they may possibly change their Natures, if they were to change the Climate; I would humbly propose, that this general Sentence of *Death* be changed for *Transportation*."¹² Franklin's call to export these descendants of the serpent that had disrupted Adam and Eve's Edenic union in "the Beginning of the World" identified the colonies as a proto-paradisiacal space, from which the rattlesnake—representative of British criminals, imperial meddling, and, perhaps, Native Americans—needed to be driven. The snake symbolized a unified colonial discontent even as it identified North America as the site of a second Eden waiting to bloom.

Exactly three years later, Franklin resurrected this icon of American discontent and strengthened its association with the unified, Edenic colonies. Already anticipating, in 1754, the hostilities that would become the French and Indian War, Franklin printed Jonathan Belcher's speech soliciting "a strict Union among all His Majesty's Colonies . . . to ward off from yourselves and your Posterity, the fatal Consequences that must attend the present unjustifiable Violences and Insults of the *French* (in Conjunction with the *Indians*)."¹³ To illustrate Belcher's call for colonial unity—and, perhaps, to drum up support for his own Albany Plan of Union, which some suggest he had modeled on the Iroquois League and which he would formally present for adoption in June 1754¹⁴—Franklin

ment and Well Peopling of the Colonies"—came in response to a need never expressed by the colonies.

12. Americanus, "Philadelphia, May 9," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1751, 2; emphasis in original.

13. Jonathan Belcher, "The Speech of His Excellency Jonathan Belcher," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754, 1; emphasis in original.

14. See Robert C. Newbold, *The Albany Congress and Plan of Union of 1754* (New York: Vantage Press, 1955). Bruce Johansen is the leading advocate for the Iroquois influence theory, Timothy Shannon its most vocal opponent. See Bruce Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: How the American Indian Helped to Shape Democracy* (Boston: Harvard Common Press, 1987); and Timothy J. Shannon, *Crossroads of Empire: Indians, Colonists, and the Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

returned to the image of the rattlesnake in a woodcut widely recognized as the first political cartoon published in America. In the cartoon Franklin depicted a rattlesnake divided into eight labeled segments—one each for N[ew]. E[ngland]., N[ew]. Y[ork]., N[ew]. J[ersey]., P[ennsylvania]., M[aryland]., V[irginia]., N[orth]. C[arolina]., and S[outh]. C[arolina]—with the legend “Join, or Die” below, a rather ironic image, since the rattlesnake was a serpent more closely associated with the Native American enemies Franklin warned of than the English colonists he sought to unify.¹⁵ Henry Preble argues that the snake’s original use in the Saunders murder case three years before “could scarcely have been forgotten” by Franklin’s readers, and in this woodcut, as in his satirical attack on the practice of transportation, Franklin presented the rattlesnake as a reminder of the need for unity in opposing an outside threat to an implicit colonial Eden.¹⁶

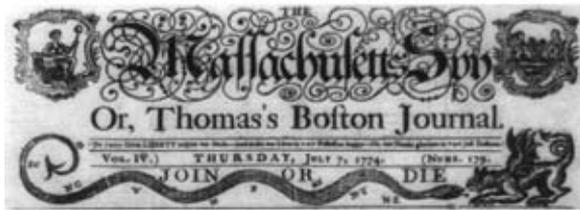
Over the next twenty years Franklin’s woodcut was adopted, adapted, and widely reprinted by newspapers from South Carolina to Massachusetts, and by the time of the Revolution the original, segmented serpent had largely been replaced by a single, whole snake with thirteen rattles to symbolize the effectual and Edenic “union of the colonies” in the United States. The warning “Don’t Tread on Me” typically accompanied this representation of national unity, and during the War for Independence the rattlesnake became an official emblem of the United States military.¹⁷ Marc Leepson notes that Charles Gadsden mounted the snake and motto on a field of yellow silk and gave it to Esek Hopkins, commodore of “the first Continental Navy fleet, in December 1775.”¹⁸ The Gadsden flag, as it became known,

15. “Join, or Die,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754, 2.

16. Geo. Henry Preble, *Origin and History of the American Flag* (Philadelphia: Nicholas L. Brown, 1917), 214.

17. Schuyler Hamilton, *History of the National Flag of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1852), 74. Although Franklin may not, initially, have expected that colonists would adopt his woodcut as a permanent emblem of unity, J. A. Leo Lemay has demonstrated that he did eventually lobby for its adoption during the Revolutionary War. Writing anonymously in the *Pennsylvania Journal*, Franklin presented “The Rattle-Snake as a Symbol of America,” arguing that the serpent is “a strong picture of the temper and conduct of America.” See Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, 744–46.

18. Marc Leepson, *Flag* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 12. Hamilton offers a fascinating insight into the symbolical portent of Gadsden’s flag, arguing that the black snake centered on a yellow field was intended to mimic “the quarantine flag of the mother country [which] was a *yellow* flag with a dark spot, a representation of the plague-spot in the middle.” Hamilton goes on to suggest that “those colors were, doubtless, chosen for the rattlesnake flag, to indicate the deadly charac-



Figures 1 and 2. Franklin's cartoon made its way onto the mastheads of many newspapers, including Isaiah Thomas's *Massachusetts Spy*, whose masthead was engraved by Paul Revere. Images courtesy of the Library of Congress.

was apparently the banner raised by John Paul Jones when he “hoisted the flag of America, with his own hands, the first time it was ever displayed,” and Gadsden later presented a second flag to the Continental Congress, which hung the standard “in the southwest corner of that room, at the left hand of the President’s chair.”¹⁹ A 1775 flag employed at Bunker Hill displayed the snake on a crimson field with a Union Jack in the canton,²⁰ the Culpeper Minutemen standard featured a black rattlesnake on a white field, and other banners depicted the rattlesnake stretched from the bottom right to the top left corner against a field of red and white, or sometimes red and

ter of the venom of the rattlesnake, and the danger of treading on it.” See Hamilton, *History of the National Flag*, 83; emphasis in original.

19. As quoted in Hamilton, *History of the National Flag*, 79; Preble, *Origin and History of the American Flag*, 216.

20. Preble, *Origin and History of the American Flag*, 205.

blue, stripes.²¹ A rattlesnake even graced the official 1778 seal of the War Department.²²

By the end of the Revolutionary War, the rattlesnake may have been the single most widely recognized symbol of colonial unity and the new, paradisiacal nation. In the decades immediately following the war, writers hailed the arrival of that second Eden Franklin had anticipated, and Timothy Dwight, theologian, educator, and poet, counseled delegates to the Constitutional Convention:

’Tis yours to bid these scenes of Eden shine;
First then, and last, the federal bands entwine:
To this your every aim, and effort bend;
Let all your counsels here commence, and end. (151–54)²³

Even soldiers, who followed orders sealed with the image of a rattlesnake and who marched under a rattlesnake banner, thought of the nation for which they fought in Edenic terms. David Humphreys, a colonel and aide-de-camp to George Washington during the war, predicted that the United States would “flourish in unfading prime,/Each age refining thro’ the reign of time” until

Where now the thorn, or tangled thicket grows,
The wilderness shall blossom as the rose,
Unbounded deserts unknown charms assume,
Like Salem flourish, and like Eden bloom. (71–74)²⁴

Ironically and improbably, the rattlesnake became a symbol of the United States and its paradisiacal potential, but those who questioned the viability of this new, Edenic republic quickly converted it and other species of snakes into representations of the nation’s imperfections, omens of an imminent fall.²⁵

21. Milo M. Quaise, Melvin J. Weig, and Roy E. Appleman, *The History of the United States Flag* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 37.

22. Hamilton, *History of the National Flag*, 74.

23. Timothy Dwight, “Address of the Genius of Columbia, to the Delegates of the Convention, at Philadelphia,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, June 6, 1787, 92.

24. David Humphreys, “An Address to the Officers and Soldiers of the American Army, Concluded,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, October 11, 1786, 28.

25. Though the Freemason views of the Founding Fathers frequently did not align with the common Christian emphases of major Protestant sects in the early

THE FASCINATING DANGERS OF AN INTERRACIAL UNION

Writers of the early republic framed all manner of threats to national prosperity in the language of serpentine fascination. They worried that “power was fascinating” and would transform some future president into a despot whose “fascinating cant” would sound like “the hissing of the serpent”;²⁶ that the monarchical tradition was “too fascinating . . . to be resisted,” even by “friends of representative government,” and that supporters of hereditary rule would “fascinate [citizens’] eyes and make them view Aristocracy, as some harmless little creature” until, “in the course of a few years, those officers should, like Pharaoh’s magicians, convert their wands into serpents”;²⁷ and that “FACTION, more frightful than *Medusa*, with her thousand grisly snakes,” would infect the nation with “the poison of party principle,” as men like Aaron Burr and his “fascinating friends” exerted a “fascinating influence” and lured “citizens to form a third party.”²⁸ During the first thirty years of its existence almost any danger to the Edenic nation could be—and was—described in the terms of rattlesnake fascination, but the multiracial character of the United States was the threat to national security most commonly represented as a serpent lurking in the pristine garden of the early republic.

Those who believed that racial diversity would pose potentially insurmountable challenges to the continued existence of the United States expressed their concerns regarding the dangers of sharing a physical space with Native Americans in the language of rattlesnake fascination. One writer worried that the French would, from Canada, incite Indians living

republic, the Christian allegory of the Fall definitely informed Freemason speech. Washington, in his address at the Freemason ceremony held for the laying of the cornerstone of the federal Capitol building, described the Union as a “second Paradise,” and his fellow Freemasons worried that this new Eden would also fall prey to a serpent. John Eliot warned his fellow Masons: “Let not calumny, the *vice of little souls*, and which is sure to poison the enjoyments of social beings, spread its baneful effects among a Brotherhood united as we are, in amity and friendship. Let not the *snakes of envy* hiss.” See Washington, “Oration,” *Columbian Centinel*, October 9, 1793, 1; emphases in original; John Eliot, *The Charge*, in Christopher Gore, *An Oration* (Boston, 1783), 18.

26. “Translated for the Newport Herald,” *Newport Herald*, August 27, 1789, 1; “From the Ulster Gazette,” *Spectator*, August 31, 1803, 1. The rise of a Bonapartan leader was the most feared outcome for such citizens; see, for example, “Political,” *Northern Whig*, February 14, 1809, 1.

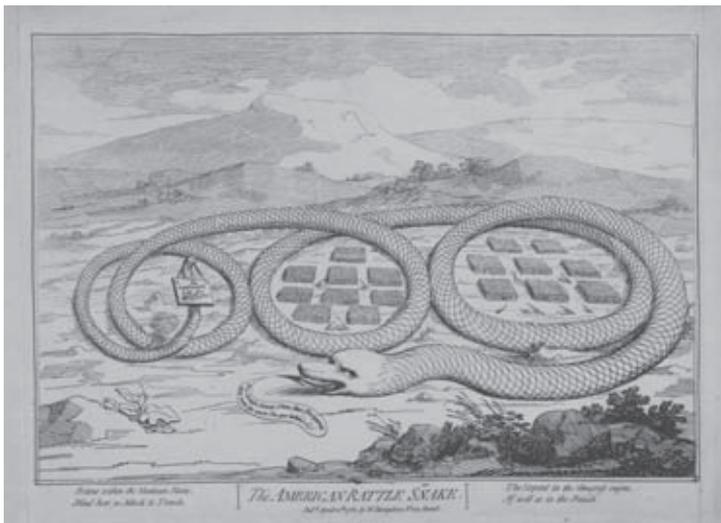
27. “The Citizen,” *American Citizen and General Advertiser*, December 19, 1801, 2; “When, in the very hot-bed . . .,” *Argus*, September 16, 1791, 3.

28. Benjamin Gleason, “Extracts of an Oration,” *Democrat*, August 23, 1806, 2; emphasis in original; “The following Toast is . . .,” *Patriot*, April 11, 1803, 2.



Figures 3–7. *Clockwise from top left:* Modern renderings of the Gadsden flag, the Culpeper Minutemen flag, the Ensign of the South Carolina Navy, the Department of the Army Seal, and the Naval Jack.

inside the borders of the United States to rebel; he warned that these imperial agents would, “serpent-like, fascinate the rude Indians” and make them the “*good and faithful servants* of the would-be demigod of Europe,” Napoleon. Indian uprisings frightened white colonists and citizens at least in part because they believed that Indians themselves possessed the rattlesnake’s



Figures 8–9. *Top*: In this 1782 cartoon James Gillray portrays the Continental army as a rattlesnake that has ingested “Two British Armies” and advertises an additional “Apartment to lett for Military Gentlemen.” *Bottom*: In this visual depiction of the war’s outcome, the United States is represented by a Minerva figure whose shield bears a rattlesnake circumferenced by the Ouroboros, a mythological symbol frequently used by the Freemasons to depict a state of constant renewal. The rattlesnake, responsible for American victory but also a portent of the Fall, is symbolically contained by a serpentine emblem of Edenic regeneration. Images courtesy of the Library of Congress.

power to fascinate.²⁹ In “Baker’s Fight,” an account of the French and Indian War that recirculated during the early years of president Andrew Jackson’s Indian removal policy, when tensions between Native Americans and white citizens were particularly high, Captain Baker, the white protagonist, catches sight of Tumelek, his Indian foe, but “before he could well determine that he really was in sight, [Tumelek] had vanished without a visible motion, like the head of the black snake in the high grass.—The hunter felt in the encounter something of the fascination that is felt from the eye of a serpent, and began to doubt” whether he would survive.³⁰ A second narrative from the early nineteenth century describes an Indian with a gun in his hand poised over a sleeping man. When the slumbering man awakes, he sees that the Indian’s “eye was as brightly and as silently upon me. It was like fascination. I could only look at him and breathe softly, as if I feared to disturb the warrior.”³¹ Not only were Native Americans themselves susceptible to the fascinating influence of Napoleon’s minions, but they also, in their attacks on white colonists and, later, citizens of the United States, possessed the power to fascinate and immobilize their victims.³² Native

29. “The Gazette. ‘Be Just—And Fear Not,’” *Concord Gazette*, January 14, 1812, 3; emphasis in original. A single passage from William Gilmore Simms’s 1835 novel, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, illustrates the serpentine character of Native Americans, their power to fascinate, and their susceptibility to fascination all at the same time: “the glance of Sanutee indicated a mind unconscious of the effect which it had produced. His eye was fixed upon another object, which seemed to exercise a fascinating influence upon him. His hands were outstretched, his lips parted, as it were, in amazement and awe, and his whole attitude was that of devotion. The eyes of the assembly followed the direction of his, and every bosom thrilled with the wildest throes of natural superstition, as they beheld Enoree-Mattee, the prophet, writhing upon the ground at a little distance, in the most horrible convulsions. The glare of the torches around him showed the terrific distortion of every feature. His eyes were protruded, as if bursting from their sockets—his tongue hung from his widely distended jaws, covered with foam—while his hands and legs seemed doubled up, like a knotted up band of snakes, huddling in uncouth sports in midsummer.” Simms warned in a later passage that in addition to fascinating others by assuming serpentine mannerisms, Native Americans could also control actual rattlesnakes: “with a single note, he bids the serpent uncoil from its purpose, and wind unharmed away from the bosom of his victim.” See William Gilmore Simms, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, ed. John Caldwell Guilds (1835; repr., Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 88, 278.

30. “Baker’s Fight,” *Farmers’ Cabinet*, October 17, 1829, 1.

31. “First and Last Sacrifice,” *New-Hampshire Sentinel*, October 30, 1829, 1.

32. By 1791 citizens of the early republic had begun referring to the Blackfoot nation as “the Snake Indians” (OED, s.v. “Snake”), but colonial recognition of the association between the rattlesnake and Native American warfare was nearly as old

Americans were, in their role as allegorical rattlesnakes within a republican Eden, far more terrifying to the white populace than the serpent ever had been to Eve.

No novel captured and exploited this fear more effectively than William Gilmore Simms's *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, which circulated widely in the southern United States during the years of the Cherokee uprising and their subsequent march along the Trail of Tears. The Yemassee warriors of Simms's novel lie "in the cold swamp, while the copper snake creeps over us as we sleep," and later in the novel the Yemassee chief Ishia-gaska, after "throwing himself flat upon the ground," imitates the movements of that snake as "he crawled on like a serpent."³³ The Yemassee chief Sanutee has "ears more impenetrable than those of the adder"; Sanutee's son, Oconestoga, has "a body limber as the snake"; and the Coosaw chief Chinnabee carries a "stuffed rattlesnake in coil, with protruded fang, perched upon a staff" because Coosaw braves "were equally fearless and equally fatal with that reptile."³⁴ When Gabriel Harrison, the novel's aristocratic white hero, confronts Chinnabee, his Native American nemesis, the chief throws himself "like a ball at the feet of his enemy"—a position from which he must later "uncoil" himself like a snake—and speaks to Harrison: "Good!—the snake is in the bush. Look! *Coosab-moray-te* [Harrison]—put the foot on his head."³⁵ With this invitation to imagine Harrison's foot over the head of a snakelike Chinnabee, Simms identified Native Americans with the serpent of Genesis.³⁶ Simms repeatedly described Native Ameri-

as the colonies themselves. When the Narragansett sachem Canonicus wished to threaten William Bradford's Plymouth settlement with warfare, he did so by delivering a bundle of arrows wrapped in a rattlesnake skin. In what was perhaps the first occasion on which European colonists turned Native American usages of the rattlesnake to their own purposes, Bradford returned the snakeskin filled with powder and shot. See William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (ca. 1650; repr., New York: Knopf, 1959), 96; Edward Winslow, *Good News from New-England* (London, 1624), 2–4. Native American war paint also adopted the patterns of snakeskin.

33. Simms, *The Yemassee*, 80, 317.

34. *Ibid.*, 84, 171, 252.

35. *Ibid.*, 375.

36. In the Bible, speaking to the serpent that has tempted Eve, God declares, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Here Chinnabee—the serpent, and an implicitly satanic figure—invites Harrison—the seed of the woman, and an implicit Christ figure—to use his foot, or heel, to crush Chinnabee's head; Harrison declines because he recognizes this as a trick that will place him at a disadvantage in the ensuing combat.



Figure 10. This engraving of a Louisiana Indian, first published in 1774, depicts a warrior with a serpent tattoo on his chest holding a snake in his right hand and a scalp in his left, suggesting that the serpentine nature and powers of Native Americans pose a threat to colonists' safety. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

cans as “subtle,”³⁷ and “the old Puritan,” Pastor Matthews, implores God, “Make the savage to bite the dust.”³⁸ Harrison, Matthews, and the other white settlers will never enjoy peace “in a world so new and beautiful” as the paradisiacal early republic, Simms suggested, unless they can first drive Native American nations out of the land.³⁹

As much as the prospect of war with Native American nations may have frightened the male citizens of the early republic, they were still more distressed by the prospect of white women being fascinated and murdered—or, even worse, seduced—by Indians. Sarah Josepha Hale’s short story “The Frontier House” (1828) climaxes as “the light fell full on the pale face of Rebecca; her eyes, as if by the power of fascination, were riveted on the Indian, his fiery glance, was raised towards her, and their gaze met.”⁴⁰ This fascinating, interlocking gaze caused considerable angst on the part of white men and women. In Rebecca’s case, the danger was death, but other writers feared miscegenation more than massacre. Although Indian eyes sometimes fascinated and terrified the gazer with their “dark ferocity,” they could also display a “placid regard which always fascinates and attracts attention” from the fairer sex.⁴¹ It was the effect of this gaze that white writers feared most.

The 1824 marriage of the white Sarah Northrop to the Native American John Ridge prompted an editorial warning published across New England that white young women gazing at Indians were subject to “*hallucination*” as “their *spiritual eyes* discover [*celestial charms*] in those tawny sons of the forest.” As a result, administrators of the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut, instructed “the Cherokee youth” of the academy that they “must not look at a [white] young woman.”⁴² Elias Boudinot, an Indian student at the school, disobeyed and proposed marriage to Harriet Gold, whose friends and family accused her of reacting with “animal feeling” to his “black eyes,” as though she were a small bird charmed by the gaze of a

37. Simms, *The Yemassee*, 24, 359, 373.

38. *Ibid.*, 320. The serpent of Genesis “was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made,” and as part of the serpent’s punishment God decrees that “upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3:1, 14).

39. Simms, *The Yemassee*, 36.

40. Sarah Josepha Hale, “The Frontier House,” as reprinted in *Ladies’ Companion*, January 1853, 235–39.

41. “Indian Genius,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, August 21, 1816, 3.

42. As quoted in Theresa Strouth Gaul, ed., *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823–1839* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 14, 19; emphases in original.

serpent. They could imagine no fate worse than her marriage to an Indian and said so boldly: “if H[arriet] must die for an Indian or have him, I do say she had as well die.”⁴³ In addition to their general disapproval of the match, they harbored a deep fear that Harriet’s marriage would prompt a rash of interracial unions. Instead of simply suggesting that she would be unhappy with her new husband, her family and friends attempted to dissuade her from marrying Boudinot with an allegory that illustrates the effect her marriage could have on the larger community:

your Father has a perfect right to kindle a fire on his own land; but if his neighbor comes & expresses his fears that that fire so kindled, will be driven by the wind into his fields, & if there is indeed manifest reason to fear that such fire will injure his neighbour’s property, then, though it be *on his own ground*, your Father cannot kindle such a fire without doing that which, in such circumstances, becomes absolutely wrong; . . . *Before you kindle the fire*, which if once kindled may burn, we know not how far, nor how long, O Harriet, before you kindle the fire, *remember . . . that God will hold you accountable to Him, for all the injury which His cause may thus receive.*⁴⁴

From the Gold family’s perspective, Harriet’s love for Boudinot threatened to ignite a miscegenetic wildfire that would consume Connecticut and destroy public support for proselytizing organizations such as the Foreign Mission School. White citizens understood that the fascinating eyes of Indian young men, like the eyes of serpents in Native American legends, posed a danger to society itself, not just to individual young women.

Child capitalized on this fear in *Hobomok*, which was published the same year as the Northrop-Ridge marriage. Her Eve-like protagonist, Mary Conant, eventually falls into a “stupefied state” upon receiving news that her lover has been lost at sea, and it is in this condition that Hobomok finds and marries her: she remains “unconscious of any change in her situation” during and even after the marriage.⁴⁵ Her father, like Harriet Gold’s relations, declares, “I find I could more readily have covered her sweet face with the clods, than bear this,” and treats Mary as dead. Child foreshadowed Mary’s loss of willpower and effectual death in an earlier description of animal fascination and the dangers posed by Native American warriors; when Hobomok takes Mary and Mr. Conant on a deer hunt despite the

43. *Ibid.*, 89, 137, 121–22.

44. *Ibid.*, 93; emphases in original.

45. Child, *Hobomok*, 135, 125.

father's objections that this spectacle will "entice [women's] wandering hearts," torchlight attracts and holds the attention of a passing animal. Though the deer recognizes the hunters as enemies, "so powerful was the fascination of the torches, that his majestic antlers seemed motionless as the adjacent shrubbery."⁴⁶ Mary might similarly have recognized in Hobomok's pagan nature an enemy to her Christian faith, but when he leads her to his wigwam by "the rays of a bright October moon," she, like the deer, remains "pale and motionless," perhaps remembering the sight of Hobomok's eyes during the hunt, when the moon's "wild fitful light shone full upon the unmoved countenance of the savage, and streamed back unbroken upon the rigid features of the Calvinist." As Hobomok draws his bow to slay the deer, Mary "touched his shoulder, as she said, 'Don't kill it, Hobomok—don't;'" but the weapon was already on the wing." So too, when Hobomok "asked his intended bride whether she was willing to be married in the Indian form," proposing her spiritual slaughter (at least from her father's perspective), his own mother intercedes, objecting, "She is mad."⁴⁷ Neither Mary's entreaty nor the old woman's objection saves the victims, and Mary's Fall from the Eden in which she lives is, at least by analogy, a product of the moon's fascinating rays reflecting "unbroken" from Hobomok's eyes and into her own.

Though Child associated Mary's fascination—and that of the deer that foreshadows her fate—with visual stimuli and Native Americans, Child's novel does not insist on a literal connection between Native American eyes and the serpent's gaze; rather, she seems to suggest a more general correspondence between "savage" or supernatural Native American traditions and a fascinated paralysis. By relegating the actual figure of the rattlesnake

46. *Ibid.*, 133, 87, 89. Simms's novel presents an interesting contrast to Child's. When a "monstrous rattlesnake" caught the eye of Simms's Bess Matthews, "its powerful eye shot forth glances of that fatal power of fascination," but here an Indian hunter—Oconestoga—rescues her by killing the rattlesnake with an arrow. This liberation might seem intended to assuage the white fears of Native American hunters fascinating white women that Child stoked, but Simms clearly had no such intent. After killing the snake, Oconestoga does not give "more than a single glance to the maiden"; he shoots in order to gain possession of the snake, whose "attributes are devoutly esteemed among [Native Americans], and many of their own habits derive their existence from models furnished by his peculiarities." Rather than allaying white fears of Native American fascination, Simms stoked them by aligning this seemingly benevolent Indian brave with the rattlesnake as a dangerous threat to the health and chastity of white women. See Simms, *The Yemassee*, 155, 158.

47. Child, *Hobomok*, 123, 89, 124.

to the background, Child transformed fascination into a function of Native American culture dissociated from the actual abilities of North American snakes, and if the dangers of serpentlike fascination were still, because of the perceived link between rattlesnakes and Native Americans, most commonly associated with Indians, other white writers in the early republic took advantage of this dissociation to attribute the powers of fascination to different racialized groups. James Madison, in an address promoting Jeffersonian agrarianism, explained that “fascination . . . belongs to that uncivilized state”; it is not a danger exclusively associated with the Indians of North America, but one characteristic of all “of our savage neighbors,” including the Tartars, Greenlanders, and Peruvians.⁴⁸ Other ethnic groups wielded the power of fascination in direct proportion to their supposed identity as wild or uncivilized peoples. One anonymous commentator noted, “There is a sort of fascination and peculiarity to the *Scottish* character” directly related to the “wild, grand and magnificent scenery of their country.”⁴⁹ Spaniards, with their “swarthy complexion” and their “black hair and eyes” were likewise “fascinating in their manners” precisely because those manners were considered to be “uncultivated.”⁵⁰ The Irish were “certainly more fascinating” to U.S. citizens than their British counterparts because their similarities to “the natives of this barbarous country” were “an irresistible lure to every kind of attention.”⁵¹ White writers consistently linked racialized or “primitive” peoples to the phenomenon of fascination, a connection that J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur exploits in his denunciation of slavery.

In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Crèvecoeur praised the paradisiacal American landscape, but his discussion of slavery also warned of an impending fall. In North America, Crèvecoeur wrote, “Every thing has tended to regenerate,” and the citizens have “escaped the miseries which attended our fathers!” Under the careful cultivation of European immigrants, the land had developed into a second Eden, where “the labours of its inhabitants [were] singularly rewarded by nature . . . with barren spots

48. James Madison, “Address by Mr. Madison,” *American Advocate and Kennebec Advertiser*, August 29, 1818, 2.

49. “Matters and Things in General,” *Newburyport Herald*, March 25, 1823, 2; emphasis in original.

50. “Miscellany,” *Farmers’ Cabinet*, July 20, 1838, 1.

51. Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), as quoted in “London and Dublin Contrasted,” *Guardian*, February 6, 1808, 48. Owenson was an Irish novelist, but her description of the Irish—as a wild people who had more in common with the Indians than with the English—was consonant with American opinion in the early nineteenth century.

fertilized, grass growing where none grew before; grain gathered from fields which had hitherto produced nothing better than brambles”; but Crèvecoeur warned that slavery would quickly and inevitably lead to the downfall of this paradise.⁵² Letter IX depicts Charleston, warning of “the poison of slavery,” and Crèvecoeur’s next epistle provides an allegorical illustration of the dangers that poison could pose. Letter X portrays the slaveholding South as a blacksnake “whose stings are mortal” and whose eyes “display a fire which I have often admired, and it is by these they are enabled to fascinate birds and squirrels.”⁵³ This blacksnake attacks “a water-snake, nearly of equal dimensions,” which represents the states opposed to slavery; “their united tails” are “mutually fastened together, by means of the writhings, which lashed them to each other” in the same way that the proslavery and antislavery interests were united by the violence of the Revolutionary War. In Crèvecoeur’s allegory, however, this union is fatal, as the fascinating blacksnake, whose “eyes seemed on fire” eventually “stifled and sunk” the water snake, drowning it in a river.⁵⁴ Inherent in Crèvecoeur’s metaphorical “critique of an Atlantic sphere of commerce fundamentally defined by slavery” is a deep-seated pessimism regarding the republic’s future that has led some, as Ed White notes, to call the *Letters* a “dystopian novel,” a text that warns of an impending fall for the young, Edenic nation.⁵⁵ At the center of Crèvecoeur’s cynicism is a concern about the dual dangers of slavery and serpentine fascination and the ways in which they threatened, together, to destabilize an otherwise Edenic republic.

An association between African American slaves and fascinating serpents would have seemed natural to Crèvecoeur’s contemporaries. Africa was the only Old World continent where snakes seemed to possess the fascinating

52. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. Susan Manning (1782; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42, 83–85.

53. *Ibid.*, 161, 166, 169.

54. *Ibid.*, 171, 172. The connection between slaves and snakes is transparent in this letter; when Crèvecoeur described a series of farmers who die from the fangs of a rattlesnake that become embedded “in the leather” of a pair of boots, he slyly hinted that it is the institution of slavery itself that is responsible. On the morning that the first farmer to die leaves his house, he goes “to mowing, with his negroes, in his boots.” Only the comma between *negroes* and *in* hides the passage’s symbolic meaning; the poison that kills the farmer is his choice to own slaves, not snake venom. Significantly, when the snake attacked, “negroes cut it in two.” Slaves divided and killed a rattlesnake most readers would have identified with the new nation. See pp. 167–68.

55. Ed White, “Crèvecoeur in Wyoming,” *Early American Literature* 43, no. 2 (2008): 380.

powers of their New World counterparts, and some white writers believed that African Americans, like the Native American nations noted above, worshipped a snake god with power over its adherents.⁵⁶ Citizens of the early republic believed that African American slaves retained a special relationship with the snake, which in Africa “infests . . . the dwellings of the negroes.”⁵⁷ One slaveholder claimed to own “a negro who could from the acuteness of his smell, at all times discover the rattlesnake, within a distance of 200 feet when in the exercise of his fascinating power.”⁵⁸ Their association with snakes even seemed to endow African Americans, “whose fascinating smiles were more penetrating through an ebony complexion than under an alabaster forehead,” with some of the power and allure attributed to rattlesnakes and other serpents.⁵⁹

56. Leventhal’s history of “the Fascinating Rattlesnake” emphasizes the home-grown nature of colonial belief in rattlesnake fascination. Though New World accounts had convinced European scientists of the snake’s powers by the mid-eighteenth century, all European discussion of the subject clearly relied on earlier North American observations; “not only did many seventeenth-century [European] accounts of the rattlesnake not mention the power of fascination, but . . . many Renaissance and seventeenth-century works discussed fascination without mentioning rattlesnakes.” See Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*, 138, 139–40. Examples of snake fascination from Africa came to light in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in travel narratives by François Le Vaillant and Martin Lichtenstein. See “Power of Serpents,” *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, August 30, 1797, 2; and “Fascinating Power of Snakes,” *Connecticut Mirror*, December 2, 1822, 2. It should also be noted that Africans were credited with having discovered the same secrets of animal fascination that allowed Indians such as Hobomok to fascinate deer. Africans taught European hunters and explorers to take advantage of the “overmastering effect of the human eye” on wild animals. See “Natural History,” *Eastern Argus*, November 15, 1824, 1. On the central role of the serpent in African American voodoo culture, see Alice Eley Jones, “Sacred Places and Holy Ground: West African Spiritualism at Stagville Plantation,” in Grey Gundaker, ed., *Keep Your Head to the Sky* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 102–4. Simms linked the African American slave Hector with snakes in the same way that he connected Native Americans to serpents. At the behest of his master, Harrison, Hector stealthily approaches Sanutee and Ishiagaska, “crawling all the way like a snake.” See Simms, *The Yemassee*, 65.

57. “From Paine’s Geographical Extracts,” *Washingtonian*, October 2, 1810, 1.

58. “Fascinating Serpents,” *Weekly Recorder*, August 21, 1818, 14. Naturalists attempting to explain the fascinating powers of rattlesnakes scientifically proposed that the serpents exude an odor that immobilizes those who breathe it in; the slave owner in this anecdote clearly subscribes to this belief and not to the notion that rattlesnake fascination is a product of serpentine eyes.

59. “Miscellany,” *Hancock Gazette*, August 24, 1820, 1.

But white men and women of the early republic never feared the fascinating powers of slaves in the same way that they dreaded the interlocking gaze of Native Americans. Instead, much of their fear revolved around the possibility that fascination would lead to the liberation of the slaves and an interracial union of ostensible equals. At the turn of the century slaveholders admonished their abolitionist neighbors that nothing would lead to the fall of the United States sooner than the efforts of “your *right liberty and equality* men,” who sought “to carry the fascinating doctrine of the *new school* to greater length, than even the most enthusiastic of his democratic brethren” by the “immediate and universal emancipation of the blacks.”⁶⁰ An 1806 New York editorial warned of the “fascinating charm at first assumed by innovation” and cautioned that the “best political writers have traced the fall of Roman liberty to the sudden emancipation of slaves” and similar “innovating measures in extension of the popular or democratic authority.”⁶¹ Supporters of slavery advocated the deportation of free African Americans in 1831 because they feared “the effects produced [on slaves] by the fascinating, but delusive appearance of happiness, exhibited in persons of their own complexion, roaming in idleness and vice among them.”⁶² Advocates of the status quo chided those who believed that the abolition of slavery and the establishment of “uncircumscribed liberty, unalterable equity, eternal causation, with much more such shrubbery of the imagination, are to flourish together, and with their unfading blossoms to perfume a terrestrial paradise. The world has been much amused with such speculations of late. But, for myself, whenever I see a propagator of such nonsense, however meek his external demeanour, my mind involuntarily has a vision of the incendiary rage of a Cataline, and the bloody proscriptions of a Robespierre.”⁶³

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–52), a book that Abraham Lincoln credited with igniting the bloody Civil War, portrays the dangers of serpentine fascination and slavery more effectively than any other nineteenth-century text. In it Augustine St. Clare remarks that northerners “loathe [African Americans] as you would a snake,” and Stowe suggested that slavery ruined St. Clare’s Edenic New Orleans estate, with its “orange-trees” and “the choicest flowering plants of the tropics.” Like the serpent of

60. “Judge Bowen,” *Commercial Advertiser*, May 10, 1804, 3; emphases in original.

61. “Speculations of Dectus,” *New-York Spectator*, June 7, 1806, 1–2.

62. “South Carolina Opinions of the Colonization Society,” *Daily National Journal*, January 20, 1831, 2.

63. “Speculations of Dectus,” 2.

Genesis, Topsy, one of St. Clare's slaves, threatens to corrupt Eva, St. Clare's daughter, "who appeared to be fascinated by [Topsy's] wild diablerie, as a dove is sometimes charmed by a glittering serpent."⁶⁴ Eva's angelic influence eventually persuades Topsy to abandon her willful ways, but the threat of serpentine fascination resurfaces in the figure of Simon Legree, a white slaveholder. As if to demonstrate that everyone involved with slavery—whether white or black—eventually comes to embody a threat to the Edenic nation, Stowe transferred the dangers of a disobedient slave like Topsy onto the figure of Legree. When he commands his slaves to "'look me right in the eye,' . . . As by a fascination, every eye was now directed to the glaring, greenish-gray eye of Simon." Both slaveholder and slave represented a threat to national interests, and Stowe warned that white abuse of African American slaves would bring "the wrath of Almighty God" down on the United States.⁶⁵

First articulated by Crèvecoeur even before the Revolutionary War had officially ended, this fear that some combination of serpentine fascination and slavery would doom the Edenic republic to a bloody civil war like those that plagued the Romans and the French continued to haunt citizens of the United States until it was finally realized in 1861 at Fort Sumter. Notwithstanding the encomiums lavished on the new republic by the likes of Dwight and Humphreys, most white citizens recognized the interracial character of the United States as a potential obstacle to paradisiacal pretensions from the republic's inception, and they consistently linked that obstacle to the fascinating dangers of rattlesnakes, which colonists identified with racial others.

FASCINATION, RELIGIOUS DECLENSION, AND THE FAILURE OF EDUCATION

Though white writers persistently connected the term *fascination* with rattlesnakes and the "primitive" culture of racial others during the colonial period and for the first sixty years of the republic's existence, that word acquired new significance after Franz Mesmer's theories of animal magnetism arrived in the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His methods failed to impress Benjamin Franklin during a 1784 scientific trial held at Franklin's lodgings in Paris, but Mesmer did much to scientifically legitimize the key tenet of fascination, "that bodies

64. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 2nd ed., ed. Elizabeth Ammons (1852; repr., New York: Norton, 2010), 162, 148, 227.

65. *Ibid.*, 309, 408.

can act upon each other from a distance.” Bruce Mills explains that at the turn of the century American “scientists and scholars repeatedly reminded readers of the need to practice intellectual humility in the face of new and remarkable findings,” such as those presented by Mesmer.⁶⁶ Whereas fascination had, until the 1790s, been associated primarily with snakes, the supernatural, and “primitive” cultures, Mesmer’s work ascribed the fascinating powers of paralysis or hypnosis to natural, human, and rationally explicable causes. Many antebellum writers preserved the connection between rattlesnakes and fascination, but Mesmer’s late eighteenth-century fame made fascinated paralysis a phenomenon that was no longer associated solely with “primitive” cultures, as evidenced by the 1806 anti-abolition warnings against the powers of fascination that doomed Rome and France cited above. In fact, the threats to American prosperity most commonly linked to serpentine fascination—after racial diversity, of course—were trends historically associated more closely with an incipient modernity: religious declension and the rise of reason. Citizens of the early republic worried that the Edenic state established by the Constitutional Convention was not just postsectarian but also secular, that the *novus ordo seclorum* was a new secular order and not just a new order of the ages.⁶⁷ William Baker and other early editorialists gloomily prophesied that the United States’ “Republicanism attired in all the charms of innocence” would submit to “the fascinating

66. Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 22.

67. Although seventeenth-century colonial government and twenty-first century republican institutions of the United States now seem inseparable from religious influences, authors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries conceived of republicanism as inherently atheistic. Because the “deliberate, if tentative, exercise in republican state formation” that Michael Winship identifies in the devout Bay colony ended with the revocation of Massachusetts’ charter in 1684, constituents of the early republic could not point to a single successful precedent in Christian republicanism. Even in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, “republican served as a smear word.” See Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2006): 450, 460.

According to Mark Noll, the majority of the country agreed that “it was only when Christian orthodoxy gave way that republicanism could flourish.” Fifty years after the formation of the United States, de Tocqueville still felt it necessary to remark on the “two perfectly distinct elements that elsewhere have often made war with each other, but which, in America, . . . they have succeeded in incorporating somehow into another and combining marvelously. I mean to speak of the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*.” See Mark A. Noll, *America’s God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60, 92; emphases in original.

mantles of peace, and reason” as Deists, led by Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, moved to “destroy religious worship and set up their Temples of Reason.”⁶⁸

Because the still-influential Calvinist doctrines of original sin and predestination precluded universal virtue and because contemporary political theory posited that a republic could thrive only if its inhabitants were taught to be universally virtuous, turn-of-the-century writers like Baker worried that the citizens of a secular United States would not learn to be virtuous enough to overcome their own depravity. A secular republic that failed to remove the taint of original sin from its citizens through education had already failed, ipso facto, so the American experiment in republicanism was, in some sense, predicated on the belief that education and an enlightened use of agency would disprove the Calvinist insistence on immutable human depravity.⁶⁹ The Founding Fathers were generally more than willing to abandon Calvin’s insistence on total depravity for Locke’s *tabula rasa*, but others in the early republic were less certain that it is education—and not grace—that produces virtue. Editorialists worried that “fascinating novels and romances, which bewilder their heads and poison their hearts” like the venom of serpents, would replace “moral and religious education” and cause “*national death*,” from which “there are no *specifics* which can renew its energies, and restore its pristine state.”⁷⁰ Novelists, for their part, warned that rational education was not an adequate replacement for religious indoctrination. The representative protagonists of novels published in the early republic are not saved by education; on the contrary, they fall prey to an immobilizing power of fascination precisely *because* they rely too heavily on their own agency or the redemptive power of a rational education, forget-

68. Wm. Baker, “For the Washington Federalist,” *Washington Federalist*, July 8, 1803, 2.

69. The newly formed United States included a religiously diverse population, and reconciling the spirit of religion with the spirit of freedom required citizens of the republic to put aside the Calvinist argument that no one “could have the civic virtues necessary for magistracy without being a saint.” Instead of relying on the predestined morality of an elect few to ratify the religious standing and moral behavior of government officials, the republic rested firm in the belief that an adequate education could teach any individual to uphold freedom and behave virtuously. In the early republic, education replaced predestinarian thinking as the primary explanation for human behavior, empowering individuals with the knowledge necessary to correctly employ their own agency. See Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Bay Polity,” 454.

70. “The Sham-Patriot Unmasked,” *Post-Boy, and Vermont & New-Hampshire Federal Courier*, October 8, 1805, 324; emphases in original.

ting their own fallen state as well as the depraved (and sometimes serpentine) natures of their tempters.⁷¹

When Marion Rust pointedly asked, “What’s Wrong with *Charlotte Temple*?” she easily could have extended the question to Charlotte’s fellow female protagonists in other novels of the early republic. Despite the Scottish Enlightenment’s emphasis on individual agency, early American novelists consistently portrayed their female characters as women subject to the power of serpentine fascination, immobilized and unable to exercise their agency or take advantage of their modern, rational educations.⁷² If Charlotte “is fond of ‘lying softly down’” rather than making crucial decisions and thereby exhibits a “terrifying absence of self-direction,” so too are Child’s Mary, Brown’s Harriot in *The Power of Sympathy*, Hawthorne’s Phoebe in *The House of the Seven Gables*, his Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*, and Stowe’s Madame de Frontignac in *The Minister’s Wooing*. Each of these women “has virtually no say over how her life unfolds.”⁷³ Living in various renditions of a newly invented American Eden, these Eves, like the original, discover that a serpent inhabits the new republic and learn—to their dismay—that it possesses the power to provoke their respective falls. All five women succumb to the power of fascination, and, in Jay Fliegelman’s words, the “daughter of Eden becomes an innocent martyr.” Each, like Charlotte, fails to “become an agent, as opposed to an instrument of her destiny,” becoming instead “the centerpiece of national identity . . . a complete product of her surroundings,” a victim of serpentine fascination and her own depravity.⁷⁴

The subtle link between rattlesnake fascination and Calvinist doctrines of predestination and original sin present in these novels of the early republic

71. The indigenous roots of rattlesnake fascination have been elided by readers like Gillian Brown, who describe feminine fascination only in terms of an imported mesmerism, the dangerous ability of one person to control the will of another through mental influence first described by Mesmer. See Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 123–47.

72. Rust’s essay extends the earlier claims of Jay Fliegelman regarding female protagonists, who notes that “the novel of seduction offered a refashioned account of the myth of the Fall and of the culpability of Eden’s children. Because her reason is not yet fully formed nor her education complete, the fallen woman in this new myth is far less accountable than she is victimized.” See Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 88.

73. Marion Rust, “What’s Wrong with *Charlotte Temple*?” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003), 99, 103.

74. Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, 88; Rust, “What’s Wrong with *Charlotte Temple*?” 107.

lic was made explicit in 1861, with the publication of Oliver Wendell Holmes's novel, *Elsie Venner*.⁷⁵ When a rattlesnake bites Catalina Venner during her pregnancy, her daughter—the eponymous main character—inherits the characteristics of the snake, occasionally hissing and assuming distressingly serpentine mannerisms. Writing at the end point of American Calvinism, Holmes dramatized the injustices of the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and predestination. As R. W. B. Lewis notes, Catalina passes on the rattlesnake poison to her daughter despite the fact that Elsie “was not morally present at the moment of the prenatal accident; she participated in it by no act of will,” and Holmes suggests that she can “not be held responsible for the actions which flowed from it” any more than the rest of humanity could be held responsible for Eve’s transgression after she fell prey to serpentine deception.⁷⁶ *Elsie Venner* makes the connection between rattlesnake fascination and Calvinist doctrines more obvious than earlier texts, but fascination—and the resulting curtailment of moral agency—was a phenomenon feared throughout the antebellum period.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Priscilla confesses that “I never have any free-will”; she has fallen sway to “Hollingsworth’s magnetism” and to Westervelt, whose power “over the will and passions of another” Hawthorne symbolically captured in his walking “stick with a wooden head, carved in vivid

75. *Elsie Venner* first appeared serially in 1859 in the *Atlantic Monthly*; it made its debut as a novel in 1861. Hawthorne published “Egotism; or, The Bosom-Serpent” in 1843, and that short story clearly portrays the United States as an Edenic space corrupted by sin. Just as clearly, the serpent that lives within the bosom of Roderick Elliston, Hawthorne’s protagonist, is not a representation of original sin, but some transgression peculiar to Elliston: “My sable friend, Scipio, has a story,” replied Roderick, ‘of a snake that had lurked in this fountain—pure and innocent as it looks—ever since it was known to the first settlers. This insinuating personage once crept into the vitals of my great-grandfather, and dwelt there many years, tormenting the old gentleman beyond mortal endurance. In short, it is a family peculiarity. But, to tell you the truth, I have no faith in this idea of the snake’s being an heir-loom. He is my own snake, and no man’s else.’” Instead of identifying the snake with original sin, Hawthorne explicitly connects it to “a tremendous Egotism—manifesting itself, in the form of jealousy.” That Elliston’s wife, Rosina, is subsequently able to root the snake from his breast further demonstrates that Hawthorne cannot have intended it as a representation of original sin, whose taint is irremovable. See Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Egotism; or, The Bosom-Serpent,” in *Tales and Sketches*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Library of America, 1982), 792–94.

76. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 36.

imitation of that of a serpent.”⁷⁷ Phoebe Pyncheon narrowly avoids her cousin Jaffrey’s kiss in *The House of the Seven Gables*, receiving instead that “benevolence, which this excellent man diffused out of his great heart into the surrounding atmosphere—very much like a serpent, which, as a preliminary to fascination, is said to fill the air with his peculiar odor.” Escaping Jaffrey Pyncheon’s influence, Phoebe instead loses her agency to the merciful Holgrave, who, with a “glance, as he fastened it on the young girl,” and a “wave of his hand . . . could complete his mastery over Phoebe’s yet free and virgin spirit” but who chooses not to exercise his power.⁷⁸ Similarly, Madame de Frontignac escapes the fascinating pursuit of Aaron Burr in Stowe’s *The Minister’s Wooing*. Burr “once asserted that he never beguiled a woman who did not come half-way to meet him,—an observation much the same as a serpent might make in regard to his birds,” and de Frontignac seems susceptible to seduction but is saved by Mary Scudder’s example of piety and purity.⁷⁹ Madame de Frontignac, Priscilla, and Phoebe fortunately evade the serpentine coils of Burr, Westervelt, and Jaffrey, but their novelistic predecessors do not fare so well.⁸⁰ Child’s Mary and Brown’s Harriot

77. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 171, 134, 198, 92. Hawthorne’s accounts of fascination are undoubtedly influenced by the work of Mesmer, but they also return to an earlier tradition of “animal magnetism” that is native to North America and involves actual animals; indeed, his description of Westervelt’s staff is reminiscent of Simms’s earlier description of Chinnabee’s staff. Mesmer described animal magnetism primarily as a force allowing one human being to influence the mental and physical state of another, but Hawthorne adapted Mesmer’s theory to American traditions of fascination by incorporating the image of the serpent. As Timothy Powell notes, American authors such as “Charles Brockden Brown self-consciously discussed [their] use of Indian subject matter to derive a uniquely ‘American’ cultural identity,” and Hawthorne’s novels, like those of Brockden Brown, deal with a “field of investigation, opened to us by our own country” that “differ[s] essentially from those which exist in Europe.” See Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 40; Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 3. For more on Mesmer’s influence in New England, see Charles Poyen, *Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982).

78. Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 108, 187.

79. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing*, ed. Susan K. Harris (1859; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 177.

80. In the American Renaissance what remained of Calvinist influence was seriously diminished. By the mid-nineteenth century even theologians who thought of themselves as staunchly Edwardsean had acknowledged the existence and importance of individual agency, and more liberal denominations had absolved humanity of the effects of original sin entirely. Not surprisingly, then, the heroines of Haw-

both fall prey to a fascination that leaves them dead, the first spiritually and the second physically.

Harriot Fawcet commits no moral atrocities in *The Power of Sympathy*, but she suffers an untimely death nonetheless. Sensible of Harrington's finer qualities—"He is extremely generous—polite—gay"—she allows herself to contemplate "the pleasures of [wedded] life" and accepts his proposal of marriage. Despite her continued chastity, death claims Harriot when she learns that Harrington is both her lover and her brother; unable to bear the mental and spiritual weight of this revelation, she sinks into the grave. Brown implied that Harriot's death was an inevitable consequence of her familial connection to Harrington, that a natural and innate sympathy robs both Harrington and Harriot of their free will in the matter, forcing them into love. To emphasize the involuntary character of their mutual attraction, Brown reminded readers: "It is said of some species of *American* serpents, that they have the power of charming birds and small animals, which they destine for their prey. The serpent is stretched underneath a tree—it looks steadfastly on the bird—their eyes meet to separate no more—the charm begins to operate—the fascinated bird flutters and hops from limb to limb, till unable any longer to extend its wings, it falls into the voracious jaws of its enemy: This is no ill emblem of the fascinating power of pleasure."⁸¹ Harriot could not resist her innocent attraction to Harrington even if she wanted to, nor could Harrington temper his affection for Harriot; their mutually respectful behavior cannot prevent a fall into the jaws of a distinctively "*American*" serpent.

Although I have highlighted "the question of woman's powerlessness in the new Republic" because scholarship by Rust and Kristie Hamilton, among others, portrays powerlessness primarily as a feminine problem,

thorne and Stowe found education a more adequate tool in overcoming their own innate depravity than did their turn-of-the-century predecessors.

81. W. H. Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, 12, 86, 75; emphasis in original. If pleasure fascinates Harrington and Harriot in *The Power of Sympathy*, it likewise forces Eliza Wharton and Major Sanford to choose between a virtuous town life and an exciting city life in *The Coquette* (1797). Sanford questions Eliza: "Do you intend to give your hand to Mr. Boyer?" She responds: "I do not intend to give my hand to any man at present. I have but lately entered society; and wish, for a while, to enjoy my freedom, in the participation of pleasures, suited to my age and sex." For both Sanford and Eliza, the quest for pleasure leaves them with limited agency. See Foster, *The Coquette*, 144; and Kristie Hamilton, "An Assault on the Will: Republican Virtue and the City in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*," *Early American Literature* 24, no. 3 (1989): 135–51.

Harrington's death serves to remind readers that a rational education and virtuous behavior did not protect men in the early United States from the serpentine dangers of paralysis any more than it did women; men also fell subject to fascination's sway.⁸² Rather, this focus on feminine agency reflects the "classical Greek thought" that Linda Kerber reminds us influenced the early republic. Greek women "were understood to lack the civic virtue that enabled men to function as independent moral beings," and the modern republic focused on feminine education as a remedy.⁸³ But both sexes were susceptible to the power of fascination, and a man's innate virtue did not preserve him from error any more than a woman's rational education; indeed, in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Clara proves less vulnerable to the fascinating voice of Carwin than her brother, Theodore. Clara hears an apparently disembodied voice speaking from her closet command her to "Hold! Hold!" but she is "able to deliberate and move" purposefully against that command. When, however, the same voice commands Theodore to "render me thy wife" as a sacrifice, he is "dazzled. [His] organs were bereaved of their activity." In *Wieland*, Theodore acts under the fascinating influence of Carwin's voice, from which rebellion "was impossible";⁸⁴ in *The Power of Sympathy*, Harrington's innate virtue and education fail to direct his agency properly, allowing him to fall in love with his sister; and Hamilton notes that in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, "the male seducer [Sanford] admits that he is not free to do as he wishes."⁸⁵ Male citizens of the early republic clearly experienced paralysis in much the same manner as female citizens, and if (unlike their female counterparts) they did not have to cope with unwanted pregnancies, they did (like their female counterparts)

82. Hamilton, "An Assault on the Will," 135. Poe reversed the typical presentation of fascination in "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether." In the insane asylum under the care of Tarr and Fether, Monsieur Maillard remarks that "we could not do at all without the women; they are the best lunatic nurses in the world; they have a way of their own, you know; their bright eyes have a marvelous effect;—something like the fascination of the snake, you know." Poe, like editorialists warning of the dangers of female suffrage, transformed women from objects of fascination to agents who charm men into docility. See Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1016.

83. Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 18.

84. Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland*, ed. Jay Fliegelman (1798; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 97, 98, 190, 193.

85. Hamilton, "An Assault on the Will," 137.

suffer the consequences of fascination and frequently wound up dead (Harrington, Wieland) or ostracized (Sanford).

Eighteenth-century American authors consistently touted the virtues of education and apparently rejected Calvinist notions of original sin and predestination, but the protagonists in their novels rarely appear to experience the benefits and guidance of educated reason when faced with paralyzing moral dilemmas explicitly compared to fascinating serpents.⁸⁶ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that in Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, "the central trauma of the novel—unwitting sibling incest—is one that could not have been avoided with increased deliberation, increased virtue, or increased reading of novels," and her point applies to the characters in many other early American novels.⁸⁷ Education and the enlightened use of reason do not protect these protagonists from moral failures; all the reason in the world cannot save men like Harrington from incestuous entanglements, and education certainly does not protect women like Charlotte Temple from seduction—a school tutor, La Rue, urges Charlotte to succumb to her lover! Theoretically, freedom from the constraints of Calvinist doctrines should allow citizens to rely on education as a natural guide to virtue, but these eighteenth-century authors suggest that education cannot save the irreligious citizens of a rational republic.

In reading *Wieland*, Jane Tompkins contends that these novelistic critiques of the republican social order function as "a plea for the restoration

86. To wit: in the preface to his novel, William Hill Brown describes *The Power of Sympathy* as an exposition on "the Advantages of FEMALE EDUCATION" and posits that the "proper cultivation of her intelligent powers" will allow a woman to become virtuous and accomplished. He presents "the human mind as an extensive plain" which "the river [of knowledge] that should water it" can make into a fruitful paradise that will bloom "into a general efflorescence" if cultivated within the "high banks" of moral rectitude. Brown's belief in the Edenic efficacy of education notwithstanding, Harriot's presumably adequate education and demonstrably virtuous behavior do not save her from an incestuous entanglement with her brother, Harrington, or help her deal with it effectively. Even if readers question Harriot's education, they cannot question Harrington's; his susceptibility to the power of sympathy demonstrates education's inadequacy. In addition, both Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton (of *The Coquette*) received excellent educations, but neither's education enabled her to avoid immoral masculine advances. W. H. Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, 7, 29, 22.

87. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "The Original American Novel, or, The American Origin of the Novel," in Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia, eds., *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 253.

of civic authority in a post-Revolutionary age,” but I would suggest that her emphasis on civic unrest does not properly account for the religious instability of the new nation. *Wieland* and other early novels portraying the failure of education in the United States do offer “a direct refutation of the Republican faith in men’s capacity to govern themselves without the supports and constraints of an established social order,” but that missing social order is as much religious as it is political.⁸⁸ In her *Coquette*, Foster illustrates the consequences of abandoning Calvinist orthodoxy for reasonable religion—the seemingly inevitable result of establishing a republic—more explicitly than her contemporaries. When, having rejected Sanford and having been rejected by Boyer, Eliza Wharton writes to Lucy Sumner asking her “to share and alleviate my cares,” Lucy replies with the following counsel: “Let reason and religion erect their throne in your breast; obey their dictates and be happy.” Up until Lucy advises her to act according to “reason and religion,” Eliza seems to have trusted in religion alone, in a Calvinistic God who had foreordained her fate:

If wand’ring through the paths of life I’ve run;
And backward trod the steps, I sought to shun,

88. Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 61, 49. The victims of serpentine fascination—those who suffer from this disruption in the social order—typically belong to a heterodox sect or lack religion altogether. Theodore Wieland’s search “for the revelation of [God’s] will” begins with the singular religious beliefs of his father, “a fanatic and a dreamer,” and ends with “such absolute possession of my mind” by an outside influence that he slaughters his own wife and children. The Conant family in *Hobomok* live in Naumkeak rather than Plymouth because Mr. Conant cannot support the Plymouth elders, and Mary’s Anglican faith distances her even further from her already estranged family. Charlotte Temple appears religiously orthodox, but after “she descend[s] from the church” in the novel’s first page, Montraville makes her “forget [her] duty to [her] Creator,” and she neglects “the morning sacrifice of prayer and praise”; having once left the church, she never darkens God’s doorway again. Although a tomb for Charlotte Temple now stands in New York’s Trinity Churchyard, Susanna Rowson does not place the burial in a church—only at a grave of unknown location. The only mention of religion in *The Power of Sympathy* refers to “the clergy as so many Philosophers, the Churches as Schools, and their Sermons as Lectures for the improvement and information of the audience,” a realization of William Baker’s nightmare prediction that Paine and Jefferson would transform the nation’s churches into temples of reason, turning houses of God into mere meeting places for educational lectures. The victims of a rattlesnake-like fascination may practice an alternative religion, neglect God completely, or make reason and philosophy into religions, but they all suffer for departing from orthodox paths. See C. B. Brown, *Wieland*, 187,

Impute my errors to your own decree;
My feet were guilty, but my heart was free.⁸⁹

But after Lucy's counsel inserts reason into Eliza's life, "a new scene [opens] upon us" in which she increasingly relies on "the dictates of [her] own judgment," rationalizing her association with Major Sanford with the justification that "since he is married; since his wife is young, beautiful and lovely, he can have no temptation to injure me."⁹⁰ This exercise in reason results in repeated visitations from Sanford, and those visitations leave Eliza a pregnant, fallen woman.

Even as Eliza's reason facilitates her fall, Foster reassures readers that an increasing abandonment of predestinarian thinking does not determine Eliza's downfall in and of itself; rather, Eliza's reliance on reason becomes dangerous only when she simultaneously ceases to believe in the degeneracy of human nature. Early in the novel, Eliza notes her own "natural disposition [toward] a participation of those pleasures" that, like "*American serpents*," fascinated and destroyed both Harrington and Harriot. After receiving Lucy's counsel, Eliza seems either to forget her own nature or at least to think that it has changed; she certainly believes in Sanford's capacity to change his own nature. She writes to Lucy that "he wept! Yes, Lucy, this libertine; this man of pleasure and gallantry wept! I really pitied him from my heart."⁹¹ Eliza's pity implies a belief that Sanford has rejected his life as a "man of pleasure," and her identification of that quality as something apart from herself likewise suggests that she no longer believes herself naturally disposed to pleasure. But Sanford has not changed his nature and neither has Lucy—their subsequent affair demonstrates the immutability of their "natural disposition" toward pleasure. Lucy's counsel fails because a rational and republican religion carries with it a belief in the power of education to change human nature. Acting rationally is fine as long as reason acknowledges the inherently degenerate state of human nature—the fact that all humanity is descended from Eve and susceptible to a similar, serpentine fall. Eliza's companion, Julia Granby, who "is all that I once was" before this "new era of life" and possesses a mind "well cultivated" by reason, sees through Sanford's scheme because she understands "how prone to error is

13, 189; Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, ed. Ann Douglas (1791; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 3, 49; W. H. Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, 55.

89. Foster, *The Coquette*, 190–92.

90. *Ibid.*, 199, 204–5.

91. *Ibid.*, 113, 201.

the human mind” and can read Sanford’s “vices in his very countenance.” Granby realizes that not marriage, not education, not reason has “changed [Sanford’s] disposition” to do evil and tries to convince Eliza of the same, but to no avail.⁹² Eliza’s reason and her belief in the ability of education to overcome the degeneracy of human nature lead her to trust both herself and Sanford too far.

Education fails in these late eighteenth-century novels of the early republic because their authors still believe in the biblical story of Eve and the serpent, in the “wickedness and depravity of the human heart,” even though their characters do not.⁹³ Does any reader really believe Clara Wieland’s claim that “if Wieland had framed juster notions of moral duty, and of the divine attributes; or if I had been gifted with ordinary equanimity or foresight, the double-tongued deceiver would have been baffled and repelled”?⁹⁴ Could additional study of Cicero have enabled Theodore to resist the serpentine tongue of Carwin? Could further education have saved Harrington? Harriot? Eliza? Sanford? No—these early novelists place their protagonists in nearly impossible situations whose negative outcomes seem foreordained, the inexorable result of a human depravity that they do not recognize and that is the product of Eve’s fall—a connection between original sin and fascination reinforced by the descriptions of serpents that represent both ideas. Even Charlotte Temple, whose “mind is not depraved” and whom Rowson describes as “pure and innocent by nature,” possesses a natural “inclination” to elope with her seducer. Although Charlotte cannot imagine Montraville betraying her trust, Rowson knows that “a man may smile, and smile, and be a villain”; she knows that “the heart is deceitful” and wicked.⁹⁵ Even the strictest Calvinist theologians of the eighteenth-century United States acknowledged human agency, but the doctrines of original sin and total depravity were not wholly abandoned until much later.

Although Ann Douglas asserts that “the vitiation and near-disappearance of the Calvinist tradition” did not commence until around 1820, orthodox Calvinists in the late eighteenth century had already begun to accept the necessity of individual moral agency in the new republic.⁹⁶ Timothy Dwight, Jonathan Edwards’s grandson and theological heir, conceded edu-

92. *Ibid.*, 192, 191, 207, 194, 202, 209.

93. W. H. Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, 37.

94. C. B. Brown, *Wieland*, 278.

95. Rowson, *Charlotte Temple*, 66, 24, 47, 76, 93.

96. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998), 7.

cation's power "to persuade men to become virtuous; or, in other words, to persuade them with the heart to believe and obey the Gospel," implicitly recognizing that men could act virtuously despite their inherent degeneracy. Dwight did not, however, suggest that education and agency alone could overcome corrupt human nature; every man still needed to "discern the nature, and extent, of his guilt; the strength of his evil propensities; the obstinacy of his unbelief, and impenitence; the uniformity of his disobedience; the completeness of his ruin; his exposure to final condemnation; and his utter indisposition to return to God."⁹⁷ Even Dwight's relatively liberal successor, Nathaniel Taylor, who, as Douglas Sweeney notes, "changed the face forever of New England Calvinism," and whose ministry divided nineteenth-century theologians who thought of themselves as followers of Edwards, wrote in 1828 that "the entire moral depravity of mankind is by nature."⁹⁸ Not until the middle of the nineteenth century did Horace Bushnell's claim that "the child is [not] to grow up in sin, to be converted after he comes to a mature age; but that he is to open on the world as one that is spiritually renewed" gain substantial ground among formerly Calvinist congregations.⁹⁹ Notwithstanding the Lockean rhetoric of national leaders, novelists of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century republic remained committed to notions of original sin and human depravity.

In this context, the narratives of Charles Brockden Brown, William Hill Brown, Lydia Maria Child, Hannah Webster Foster, and Susanna Rowson emerge as authorial attempts to imagine an as yet unknown reality in which the collective consciousness of the serpentine dangers of human depravity has vanished, not depictions of a society in which this had already happened. In *Wieland*, *The Power of Sympathy*, *Hobomok*, *The Coquette*, and *Charlotte Temple*, we see projections of the Edenic myth onto the United States' uncertain future as an experiment in secular—or at least postsecular—

97. Timothy Dwight, *Theology; Explained and Defended, in a Series of Sermons*, 10th ed. 4 vols. (New Haven: T. Dwight & Son, 1839), 4:247, 174; emphases in original.

98. Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3; Nathaniel Taylor, "Concio ad Clerum: A Sermon," in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, ed., *Theology in America* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1967), 214. Sweeney explains that Taylor's emphasis on the natural—as opposed to the willful, moral—degeneracy of humanity is actually a rejection of the conservative Calvinist belief in the immediate transmission of original sin for a belief in the mediate imputation of Adam's guilt. See Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 69–90.

99. Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861), 10.

ian—republicanism. As Adam and Eve received an education from God that forbade the fruit but did not mention the presence of a dangerous serpent, so too do the imagined republican citizens of novelists receive an education full of moral imperatives without an understanding of the dangers inherent in dealing with depraved human beings. As Eve found her initial resolutions to obey God ineffective when confronted by the serpent's fascinating influence, and as Adam lost his self-restraint when tempted by a fallen Eve, so too do the novelist's imagined republican citizens find themselves powerless to act virtuously when confronted with paralyzing moral dilemmas that resemble rattlesnakes. This fascinated powerlessness defines the protagonists of the early American novel and looms large as the potential fate of a nation. The Edenic republic appears to offer social mobility and increased choice, but early American novelists warned of the dangers of serpentine fascination in the absence of Calvinist strictures; they saw a rattlesnake in the garden of the early republic.

FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

When Benjamin Franklin emblemized the plight of the British colonies in his now-famous "Join, or Die" woodcut, he scarcely could have imagined the uses to which his rattlesnake would be put during the following century, but his call for colonial unity provided an enduring symbol that revolutionaries would resurrect and rally behind in the 1770s. As Franklin's rattlesnake—appropriated from the Native American peoples he sought to supplant—made its way onto the flags and seals of the United States, it became the primary visual symbol of a nation that optimistic poets like Timothy Dwight and David Humphreys described as a second Eden. Dwight and Humphreys effectively ignored future challenges to the United States, but other white writers argued that this pervasive belief in the nation's paradisiacal potential disregarded the continuing threat posed by Native Americans—the same racial group whose hostilities had prompted Franklin to adopt the rattlesnake as a symbol in the first place!—and African American slaves. Lydia Maria Child and William Gilmore Simms framed the problem of racial diversity in terms of rattlesnake fascination, and the Civil War eventually validated J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's prediction that the serpentine coils of racism and slavery would prove the Edenic nation's undoing. Other novelists skeptical of the paradisiacal nation's stability found cause for concern in the lingering effects of that Fall which drove Adam and Eve from the garden of Genesis: original sin. Prominent writers from William Hill Brown to Nathaniel Hawthorne warned that the twin specters of secularization and original sin would fascinate citi-

zens of this new state, that a rational education would fail to fortify republican agents against the depravity instilled in Eve and all humanity by the serpent in Eden.

In the first hundred years after Franklin appropriated the rattlesnake as a symbol of British colonial unity, that serpent came to represent the Edenic nation-state, the dangers of racial diversity, and the fear of religious declension—simultaneously. That the rattlesnake retained its multiple significations across the intervening century is a point made apparent by cultural artifacts from the winter of 1860–61. That winter, as previously noted, was the season in which Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed his concerns regarding the viability of a republic tainted by original sin in his serpentine novel, *Elsie Venner*. More famously, South Carolina seceded from the United States in December 1860 as a prelude to the Civil War, a conflict fought between brothers (as Cain had battled Abel on Eden's outskirts) under the auspices of a War Department whose seal still impressed official orders with the image of a rattlesnake. The Union soldiers who read those orders fought a war foreseen by those who had described the interracial character of the United States as a destructive and fascinating serpentine force, and their depiction of the connection between rattlesnakes and racially motivated conflicts was reinforced by the fiction Union soldiers consumed in their down time.

Elsie Venner was popular enough that thousands of soldiers would have had access to the novel, but Erastus Beadle's dime novels were even more popular. They "shipped out to the Union armies in camps, barracks, and hospitals," and the second-most-popular title in Beadle's library was Edward Ellis's *Seth Jones* (1860).¹⁰⁰ *Seth Jones* describes white frontiersmen who, while fighting Indians and avoiding the "horrible fascination" of a rattlesnake, assume serpentine characteristics; as they passed through a forest, "they made their way much after the fashion of snakes." After avoiding their Native American enemies, each frontiersman marries a "young maiden" of "purity and innocence" reminiscent of the prelapsarian Eve and settles in a new Eden, where "the Indians had no wish to break in upon such a happy settlement. . . . Sweetly and beautifully they all slept; sweetly and peacefully they entered upon life's duties on the morrow; and sweetly and peacefully these happy settlers ascended and went down the hillside of

100. Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 149–50. Mott estimates initial sales of *Seth Jones* at 450,000, after which it was reprinted for half a century. He lists *Elsie Venner* as a "better seller" not quite popular enough to top 300,000 copies, but close.



Figure 11. At the outbreak of the Civil War, some iterations of the South Carolina State flag introduced a rattlesnake twined around the traditional palm tree. Christopher Kimmel's allegorical depiction of the Civil War's beginnings reproduces that image; the snake wears a crown, suggesting the aristocratic pretensions of southern politicians, and breathes poisonous or paralyzing fumes toward the figure of Justice. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

life.”¹⁰¹ A well-read infantryman might, in these two novels and in his orders from the War Department, have read a brief history of the rattlesnake's significance in early American culture. The rattlesnake was a symbol of colonial and national unity as well as a representation of the religious and racial dangers that threatened to tear the Union apart; it represented both the hope of a new, national Eden and the certainty of an impending national fall.

101. Edward S. Ellis, *Seth Jones*, in *Dime Novels*, ed. Philip Durham (New York: Odyssey Press, 1966), 69, 80, 93, 95. This novel, of course, reverses the trend (noted earlier in Simms and others) of ascribing serpentine mannerisms only to the racialized adversaries of white fighters. Here the snaky movements of the white frontiersmen represent a conscious choice and reflect the intellectual superiority of white settlers in their circumstantial adoption of Native American tactics, whereas earlier

