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Confidence Games in the New Country: Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Modern Chivalry

by WILLIAM E. LENZ

ANCESTORS of the American confidence man appear in various historical and fictional American works prior to the 1840s. William Bradford condemns Thomas Morton of Merry Mount as a satanic trickster "haveing more craft than honestie" and John Lyford of Plymouth Plantation as a hypocritical knave, "that dissembling Ishmaell." In the *Magnalia Christi Americana* Cotton Mather is less severe on Morton and Lyford and less sure of Bradford's judgment of them, yet he devotes an entire chapter of that work to "Wolves in Sheeps' Cloathing," a warning about men who impersonate God's ministers for profit. A shrewd New Englander bites the residents of Fairfield in Sarah K. Knight's *Journal*, a speculator in Continental currency appears briefly in Elias Boudinot's *Journey to Boston*, while the figure of the Yankee begins a long career in *The Contrast* as Royall Tyler's sharp Jonathan.[1] Ann Eliza Bleeker's *History of Maria Kittle*, Mary White Rowlandson's *Narrative of Captivity*, William Dunlap's *André*, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* contain characters who trade in deceit. Almost all literary records of the "new country," in fact, from Christopher Columbus' *Letters*, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan*, and Captain John Smith's *True Relation of . . . Virginia*, to H. St. Jean De Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and Timothy Flint's *History of the Western States*, can themselves be read as documents soliciting the reader's confidence in an imaginative venture without offering collateral.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1815) is a catalogue of early American confidence games which have their roots in sources as diverse as Elizabethan drama and Puritan demonology. He pictures the "new country" as encouraging ambiguity, confusion, corruption, and autotheism, and presents the confidence game as a satiric model of democratic society. In addition, Brackenridge expresses com-

1. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), pp. 140, 104; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), pp. 537–51; Sarah Kemble Knight, *The Journal of Madam Knight* (New York: Peter Smith, 1935), pp. 62–63; Elias Boudinot, *Journey to Boston in 1809*, ed. Milton Halsey Thomas (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Library, 1955), pp. 58–59; and Royall Tyler, *The Contrast*, in Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953).

mon anxieties of educated Americans about the future of the new republic during its transition from Puritan theocracy to political democracy.[2] Even as it exposes discrepancies between the real and ideal in American society, *Modern Chivalry* allows the reader to discharge in laughter the tensions this gap creates by employing the traditional and therefore reassuring form of the humorous picaresque.

In Chapter 1, Captain John Farrago is mistaken for a biter by a gaggle of jockeys. Brackenridge plays on the reader's recognition of Farrago as a harmless Don Quixote to suggest the ambiguity of identity in the new country. The jockeys—stock characters in the *Spectator* tradition, "a class of people not far removed from the sagacity of a good horse"[3]—reinforce this theme by their belief "that there is no trusting appearances" (p. 7) and that Farrago must be something other than a gentleman: "For they could have no idea, that a man could come there in so singular a manner, with a groom at his foot, unless he had some great object of making money by the adventure. Under this idea, they began to interrogate him with respect to the blood and pedigree of his horse . . ." (p. 7) Their assumption that pedigree determines value spurs Farrago to lecture: "—Gentlemen, said he, it is a strange thing that you suppose that it is of any consequence what may be the pedigree of a horse. For even in men it is of no avail. Do we not find that sages have had blockheads for their sons; and that blockheads have had sages?" (p. 7).

Captain Farrago's argument is rigorously democratic, yet the implications of his reasoning escape notice: pedigree and appearance, two criteria used to determine identity and value in the Old World, are untrustworthy in the New. Like each horse, each man must be tested individually. The jockeys, who come to believe Farrago not a clever sharper but a pedantic fool, fail to recognize that he proves cause for their initial suspicions. That he is neither a biter nor a fool establishes in this first episode the uncertainty of identity, the slipperiness of language, and the limitations of perception. His misapprehension as a biter suggests several things about American society: first, the figure of the biter is familiar to the reader; second, the problem of ascertaining identity, made more difficult by the mobility of an increasing population, is so acute that it is not uncommon to assume that every stranger is a biter; and third, by the late eighteenth century the biter is no longer merely an historical *exemplum* of vice but a device of the fiction-writer. Neither moral nor immoral, the biter is a rhetorical construction which has aesthetic value; as if to confirm that the biter is in fact a literary device, Captain John Farrago is only a biter in the jockeys' imaginations and,

2. See Wendy Martin, "The Rogue and the Rational Man: Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Study of a Con Man in *Modern Chivalry*," *Early American Literature*, VIII (Fall 1973), 179–92.

3. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, ed. Claude M. Newlin (New York and London: Hafner, 1968), p. 11. All references will be to this edition, page numbers in parentheses following quotations in the text.

for an instant, in Brackenridge's prose. American fiction has the proper soil to nurture confidence games.

The reader's guide on this journey is Brackenridge's narrator, a spectator of American eccentrics who goodnaturedly admonishes Farrago, Teague, and the other characters in a normative language instilling confidence; classical and homespun maxims dot his narrative, confirming his position as a cultured rationalist. As the Captain examines the institutions of the new republic, so too does he explore its literary possibilities, incorporating sermons, tracts, historical sketches, and tall tales in his picaresque. Although his survey of literary genres echoes Farrago's tour, the narrator is no American Quixote but an enlightened gentleman whose morals, humor, and discretion mirror those of his intended audience. He adapts the styles of Swift, Addison, and Steele to the American frontier, and finds the New World in need of perhaps more moral censure than the Old.

In a typical adventure, Captain Farrago is approached by an entrepreneur who wishes to masquerade Teague as a Kickapoo Indian chief. "I confide in your good sense," the sharper tells the Captain, "and have occasion for your servant" (p. 56); Irishmen, Dutchmen, and other men with accents counterfeit Indian leaders, make treaties with federal commissioners, and divide the goods intended to prevent Indian warfare. "Is it possible," Farrago asks, "that such deception can be practised in a new country?" (p. 56). This confidence game suggests that appearances are untrustworthy, that Americans make profits from immoral activities, that the republic's officials are either knaves or fools, and that the occasional biters of earlier periods have become organized and commonplace: "These things are now reduced to a system; and it is so well known to those who are engaged in the traffic, that we think nothing of it. . . . This being the case, it can be no harm to make a farce of the whole matter; or rather a profit of it . . ." (p. 57). The treaty-maker exhibits a characteristic interest of the age in mechanics rather than morals: recognizing the discrepancies between appearance and reality, language and act, intention and result, he seeks not to unite them in Puritan fashion into one moral vision or truth but to exploit these differences for personal profit. Concerned with creating his own way to wealth, he considers financial success proof of the virtue of manipulation.

The scheme also suggests itself as a satiric model of frontier society. Brackenridge pictures the processes of democratic government as appearances which mask elaborate confidence games. Style, rather than substance, is all-important on the frontier; as if in perverse imitation of Benjamin Franklin, the treaty-maker puts on the appearance of good works, satisfying both himself and the legislative guardians of democracy. He is able to masquerade Irishmen as Indians because identity is uncertain, because language is merely style, and because everyone has

come to the new country with "some great object of making money by the adventure" (p. 7). In this society, Farrago the idealist is deluded, while the sharper follows the norm in pursuit of the real—money. Americans neither want nor need the unpleasantness of truth, but need the assurance of style.

Captain Farrago is himself fascinated by the sharper's style, inquiring how Irish can be passed off as Kickapoo, and reveals the ease with which a man of morals can become caught up in discovering practical solutions. He recognizes that the treaty-maker is not confused or disheartened by the ambiguities of the frontier, that he confidently puts them to a personally rewarding purpose, and that his scheme is a systematic program—not unlike Franklin's—for insuring survival and wealth. To dissuade Teague from becoming a partner in the swindle, the Captain adopts a version of the confidence game: he, too, manipulates through misrepresentation, picturing to Teague the pain he will endure by being scalped, rather than the profit he will enjoy scalping the government.

> There has been a man here with me, that carries on a trade with the Indians, and tells me that red-headed scalps are in great demand with them. . . . The taking off the scalp will not give much pain, it is so dextrously done by them with a crooked knife they have for that purpose. The mode of taking off the scalp is this; you lie down upon your back; a warrior puts his feet upon your shoulders, collects your hair in his left hand, and drawing a circle with the knife in his right, makes the incision, and, with a sudden pull, separates it from the head, giving, in the mean time, what is called the scalp yell. The thing is done in such an instant, that, the pain is scarcely felt. He offered me an 100 dollars, if I would have it taken off for his use, giving me directions, in the mean time, how to stretch it and dry it on a hoop. . . . He talked to me something of making you a king of the Kickapoos, after the scalp is off; but I would not count on that so much; because words are but wind. . . . (pp. 58–59)

This is not unlike Bradford representing Thomas Morton as a devil, or Captain John Smith embellishing the dramatic story of his rescue by Pocahontas. Teague, who believes Farrago's words to be more than wind, is easily deceived: "dear master, vid you trow me into ridicule, and de blessed shalvation of my life, and all dat I have in de vorld, to be trown like a dog to de savages, and have my flesh torn out of my head . . . for an 100 dollars or the like?" (p. 59).

The answer is of course not—Farrago is like Franklin a benevolent deceiver, one who subjects Teague to imaginary pain in order to protect society from actual harm. The Captain adopts the sharper's method to create a literary image of a common fear—that of being scalped—to instruct Teague as Brackenridge instructs the reader. Farrago's minute description is amusing to the reader, for unlike the bog-trotter, he knows it is merely a "tall tale." As fictional analogues of the reader's own anxieties, these literary confidence games function as humorous devices to divert attention from horrifying possibilities to harmless, rhetorical resolutions. The dangers of violence and fraud are defused because the

reader concentrates on the clever technique of the treaty-maker, the Hogarth-like terror of Teague, the precise language of Farrago, rather than on the reality of scalping. In equally precise terms Captain Farrago details the limitations of marriage, the pulpit, the stage, the legislature, and other occupations to which Teague aspires but for which he is unqualified. Myth, literature, religion, and empiricism mix without distinction in the Captain's entreaties: a seductive landlady becomes in language an American Circe, an old hag planning to magically transform Teague into a pig prior to castrating him (pp. 96–97). Frightened by these vivid images, the Irishman seems a comic version of Thomas Morton or John Lyford.

Farrago's humorous tale-telling is related to the treaty-maker's and, more closely, to Brackenridge's. Like the author of *Modern Chivalry*, the Captain creates fictions in order to instruct; both concur that "it can be no injury to deceive a man to his own advantage" (p. 246). What Farrago fails to understand, and what Brackenridge satirizes, is that like most of his countrymen, Teague reckons advantage in dollars. A blind lawyer, who argues with the Captain over Teague's service to a fraudulent conjurer "in the semblance of Belzebub," intones two laws which govern the new country: 1) "Doubtless it was a fraud upon the public; but the people themselves became a party, by consulting the wizard. . . . But in foro conscientiae, it might be a question of whether it was wrong to trick people that were willing to be tricked. Si populus vult decipi, decipiatur"; and 2) "But in a republican government, the trade or employment of a man, is but little considered. The great matter is, the profits of it. Does it make the pot boil? If the bog-trotter finds his account in the service, and makes money, the world will wink at the means" (pp. 502–03). The lawyer offers a model for seeing the American trickster as the real American Adam.

Brackenridge follows closely Farrago's attempt to reconcile this perception with the ideals of democracy. In Book II of *Modern Chivalry*, a controversy arises that echoes Cotton Mather's warning of "Wolves in Sheeps' Cloathing" and Franklin's defence of the minister Hemphill, who was accused of stealing sermons.[4]

> Two men appeared, the one of a grave aspect, with a black coat; the other without the same clerical colour of garb; but with papers in his pocket which announced his authority to preach, and officiate as a clergyman. The man with the black coat, averred, that com-

4. Compare Mather, p. 541, on sermon stealing and Benjamin Franklin on a minister named Hemphill. "I became his zealous partisan," writes Franklin, though "an unlucky occurrence hurt his cause exceedingly. One of our adversaries, having heard him preach a sermon that was much admired, thought he had somewhere read that sermon before, or at least a part of it. On search he found that part quoted in one of the British reviews, from a discourse of Dr. Foster's. This detection gave many of our party disgust. . . . I stuck by him, however, as I rather approved of his giving us good sermons composed by others than bad ones of his own manufacture, tho' the latter was the practice of our common teachers" (*The Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. L. Jessie Lemisch [New York: New American Library, 1961], p. 110). Farrago's resolution would seem to confirm Daniel Hoffman's assertion that by the mid-eighteenth-century "the power of transformation, of self-transformation, is no longer seen as malevolent" (*Form and Fable in American Fiction* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1961], p. 36).

ing over together, in a vessel from Ireland, they had been messmates; and while he was asleep one night, being drowsy after prayers, the other had stolen his credentials from his pocket. The man in possession of the papers, averred they were his own, and that the other had taken his coat, and by advantage of the cloth, thought to pass for what he was not. (p. 99)

The two preachers dramatize the difficulty of ascertaining identity, and emphasize ironically the Captain's pronouncement that "You have nothing but your character . . . in a new country to depend on" (p. 17). Farrago proposes that each preach a sermon, and "let him that expounds the scripture the best, be adjudged the clergyman" (p. 99). The two discourses present a contrast in styles as distinct as that between the Captain's and Teague's. The performances divide the people, but the Captain resolves the issue in a suggestive manner: "Gentlemen, said he, the men seem both to have considerable gifts, and I see no harm in letting them both preach. There is work enough for them in this new country; the first appears to me, to be more qualified for the city, as a very methodical preacher; but the last is most practical; and each may answer a valuable purpose in their proper place" (p. 104). The solution is itself most practical, for it recognizes that two styles may serve one purpose, and that the impostor's enthusiasm may be as important in taming the frontier as the ordained minister's credentials. Farrago reverses the judgment of Mather, and, like Franklin, who applauds Hemphill's stealing good sermons as preferable to preaching bad ones of his own composition, makes the source of anxiety a source of security by channeling the deceiver's talents into a positive outlet.

Brackenridge's characters are familiar eccentrics. The picaresque form of *Modern Chivalry* assures the reader that their misadventures are circumscribed, fictional situations which are exaggerated in order to increase the reader's enjoyment and engagement. Tensions imaged in the man who pretends to be a minister are discharged in laughter at his sermon, a recitation of Adam and Eve's genealogy, and in admiration of the Captain's solution; the reader knows that the episode is, after all, a fiction. Brackenridge, however, not only exploits the appearances of New World tricksters but also explores the implications of their appearances in American culture as creators of fictions. Of *Modern Chivalry* Brackenridge writes: "Now it may be said, that this is a fiction; but fiction, or no fiction, the nature of the thing will make it a reality" (p. 22). If fictions do become realities, then Farrago's solution of the minister-impostor is neither successful nor amusing. It is clearly unfair, not to mention unchristian, to certify the impostor as a "practical" man of God; his congregation will be at least ill-served. Farrago's decision smacks of condescension and elitism, and, as in his misrepresentation to Teague of the Indian treaty-maker's intentions, it suggests a certain sadistic pleasure the Captain takes from giving people he considers foolish what he thinks they deserve. If Americans are willing to be tricked,

and willingly accept mere style as the substance of reality, then Captain Farrago is himself willing to give them style—with a vengeance. At this point Farrago has internalized the pattern of confidence games he deplores in American society, and becomes the object of satire for more than his quixotic behavior; he manipulates for personal profit, receiving the sensations of perverse, vicarious pleasure as his reward.

In using the confidence game as a paradigm of frontier democracy, Brackenridge expresses more than the fear that politicians, lawyers, doctors, and other citizens are dishonest profiteers, and that American society encourages corruption in every profession; *Modern Chivalry* dramatically gives shape to Brackenridge's fear that beneath the appearances of order in society lie the realities of chaos. If style has become separated from substance, as Brackenridge insists in his introduction,[5] as *Modern Chivalry* demonstrates, then meaning—certainty of identity, intention, reference—cannot be determined. In the face of this epistemological uncertainty, Brackenridge focuses his fiction through a conventional literary character whose stock in trade is the confusion of appearance and reality, the substitution of language for fact—the archetypal trickster. Embodying the ambiguities of border states—between civilization and wilderness, the rulers and the ruled, style and substance—the trickster, especially in humorous guises like the Lord of Misrule or Till Eulenspiegel, performs confidence games that temporarily unleash the spirit of disorder and, as they are defined and sanctioned by society, displace unarticulated cultural fears of impending chaos. Brackenridge's repeated use of the confidence game appears in this light an attempt to domesticate the deepest fears of enlightened Americans through a constraining, recognizable, comic literary structure. *Modern Chivalry*, however, dramatizes the inability of Americans to discover adequate bases for judgment, and calls into question the ability of Brackenridge's own fiction to offer certainty or reassurance. As the new country does not have the well-defined social structures of the Old World, the confidence games of *Modern Chivalry* express cultural anxieties about the American frontier, political corruption, practical democracy, social mobility, and the limits of perception which cannot wholly be resolved in humorous fiction. The literary conventions of the Old World prove inadequate to the New.

In June 1839 the editor of the *Pittsburgh Literary Examiner and Western Monthly Review* could say of *Modern Chivalry*: "Twenty years ago this work . . . was the humorous textbook of all classes of society." The editor's dismissive tone reflects a change in the attitudes of Americans toward confidence games visible in the disappearance from polite literature of expressions of American shiftiness. Nonetheless, Brackenridge established the confidence game as a paradigm of frontier

5. See Brackenridge, p. 3: "I shall consider language only, not in the least regarding the matter of the work. . . ."

society and made available literary models for later writers.[6] The questions Brackenridge raises in his union of Old World techniques, American materials, and confidence games again demand expression in the southwestern "flush times" of another "new country."

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6. The rhetorical violence in Augustus B. Longstreet's "Georgia Theatrics" and his comic sharpers in "The Horse-Swap" (1835) seem indebted to *Modern Chivalry*. Captain Simon Suggs ironically follows the lead of Captain John Farrago. Teague's masquerade as the devil is repeated in Johnson J. Hooper's "Daddy Biggs' Scrape at Cockerell's Bend" (1845), Henry C. Lewis' "Day of Judgment" (1850), and George W. Harris' "Sut Lovingood's Chest Story" (1858). Passing the bog-trotter off as a newly discovered species of wild animal (p. 689) antedates P. T. Barnum's historical hoaxes, while the Yankees who sell counterfeit scalps for bounty (p. 671) practice a frontier version of the ancient shell game.

