"It is not for me to smile at their tyranny": Democracy and Dialogue in Charles Brockden Brown's Alcuin

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In 1776, in a well-known letter, Abigail Adams famously requested her husband, John Adams, to extend the principles of equality and liberty upon which the young nation was founded to women as well:

> I long to hear that you have declared an independancy - and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticuliar care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. (Abigail Adams, March 31, 1776; qtd. in Rossi 1974, 10-11)

She goes on to state "That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute" and therefore, she suggests that male abuse of power can only be stopped if the laws on which it is based are changed.

However, as history has shown, her request was not met with success. Dismissing her claim to equality, John Adams replied patronizingly: "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh" (John Adams, April 14, 1776; qtd. in Rossi 1974, 11). However, he also quite nervously compared her claim to the uprising and revolts of other suppressed groups (notably Native Americans and African Americans), noting that women as a group were "more numerous and powerfull than all the rest" (John Adams, April 14, 1776; qtd. in Rossi 1974, 11). Nevertheless, he goes on to write:

> Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. [...] in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. (John Adams, April 14, 1776; qtd. in Rossi 1974, 11)

Adams responds to his wife's claim to equality in a rather contradictory way. On the one hand, he uses the widespread argument that women were superior any-

way, if not in theory (de jure) then certainly in practice (de facto); on the other hand, however, he responds to her warning that women would rebel and not follow a law that they had no hand in creating with a threat of his own, conjuring up a war-like situation in which "General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight" against any change in the status quo (John Adams, April 14, 1776; qtd. in Rossi 1974, 11).[1]

This private epistolary dialogue between Abigail Adams and her husband reflects one of the central issues of American society in the late 18th century, when the young nation discussed intensely the values and principles upon which it was to be founded. In what one could call a general atmosphere of reform and renewal following the American Revolution, the question of women's rights had become more pressing because of the obvious contradiction between the values and principles to which the young nation laid claims and the ways in which they were actually put into practice (or not). In a nation that had proudly declared its independence from Britain on the grounds that "all men are created equal," that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," liberty chiefly among them, and that governments derived their legitimacy only from the "consent of the governed" (Declaration of Independence), the fact that quite a lot of Americans were actually denied the right to vote became a problem. That it was particularly the question of women's rights and female suffrage that was intensely discussed also reflected the fact that, during the revolution, women had become more and more politicized and had acted quite independently in all areas of the public sphere. Alongside their husbands, brothers, and fathers, they had fought for independence and - during the men's absence from home during the war - acted independently in their stead in business and other matters. Their complete exclusion from any significant political power did therefore not go uncontested (Evans 1997, 53-55; see also Kerber 1997, 100-130). Accordingly, women's rights and their (public) role, including suffrage, education, professional opportunities and legal status, were widely discussed, not just in private letters and conversations but also in publications ranging from the popular press to novels (Davidson 1981, 72-73).[2] Texts such as Judith Sargent Murray's essay On the Equality of the Sexes (1790), Catherine Macaulay's Letters on Education (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) or more conservative arguments such as James Fordyce's Sermons to Young Women (1766), Thomas Paine's Occasional Letter on the Female Sex (1775), or Benjamin Rush's Thoughts on Female Education (1787) circulated and were

1 That John Adams took his wife's suggestion far more seriously than his brief dismissal might show becomes also apparent in a letter he wrote five weeks later to James Sullivan, in which he discusses the problem of denying suffrage to certain groups of citizens in a more rational and balanced way (John Adams May 26, 1776; Rossi 1974, 13).

2 The discussion of women's rights was transatlantic, and a number of influential texts were published on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike men's rights, however, women's rights were not discussed in the political arena but only in newspapers, magazines and the like (Zagarri 1998, 203-204).

freely discussed (Arner 1987, 279-282; Davidson 1981, 72-73; Krause 2000, 351; Mertz 1994, 67).[3]

1 Discussing Women's Rights: Charles Brockden Brown's Alcuin

If the Adams' exchange can be considered an unsuccessful, one-sided dialogue on this topic, in which the two participants seemed to have rather unequal positions, Charles Brockden Brown's much lesser known dialogue narrative Alcuin, which was published in 1798, can be considered a counter-example. The short text is a fictional contribution to the debate surrounding women's rights, and its complicated publishing history (different versions of its first part were published, the second part remained unpublished during Brown's lifetime) reflects the often contradictory nature of the discussion about women's rights at the end of the 18th century.[4] And although Alcuin might lack the literary and aesthetic skill that Brown's later works display, it remains an important text since, in the words of Anita Vickers, "it provides mirrors to cultural and political debates over the roles of women in the new republic" (1998, 90; see also Rice 1973, 802). Moreover, as I will show, with Alcuin Brown attempts to explore the principles of democracy in a narrative form, the Active dialogue.

Alcuin: A Dialogue, significantly called "The Rights of Women" in the serialized publication in the Weekly Magazine (Krause 2000, 357) and thus recalling both Wollstonecraft's Vindication and Thomas Paine's famous The Rights of Man (1791-92), recounts a dialogue between the poor schoolteacher Alcuin and

3 For a brief overview on the debates and texts that were concerned with women's rights see Arner (1987). Rosemarie Zagarri claims that before Wollstonecraft's Vindication the concept of women's rights "was virtually inconceivable in Anglo - America" and that her text generated a wide-spread public discussion (1998, 205-206).

4 In fact, the first part of Alcuin: A Dialogue came out twice in 1798, both as a book, which was published by Elihu Hubbart Smith in New York, and as a serial publication with the title "The Rights of Women" in the Weekly Magazine, which was under the editorship of James Watters and based in Philadelphia (Arner 1987, 274). Significantly, the serial publication was not simply shorter but left out significant parts of the text. According to Robert D. Amer, the changes made fall into a pattern, eliminating anything that might be read as "espousing radical republican views, particularly those that might seem to tie the dialogue to American supporters of the French Revolution" (294). Both publications, however, only contained the first part of Alcuin. Part 2, commonly considered more radical than the first one, was not published until after Brown's death. It appeared in Paul Allen's biography of Brown, where it was accompanied by apologies and explanations, which William Dunlap, who continued Allen's project after he had died, did not remove (Davidson 1981, 71-72, Amer 1987, 287). In fact, the first complete publication of Alcuin, edited by Lee Edwards, did not appear until a good 170 years after it was written, in 1970. For a helpful and very precise publishing history, see Arner (1987); see Reid (1987) for a careful comment on and explanation of the different versions of Alcuin.

Mrs. Carter, a well-situated widow who lives with her brother, Dr. Carter.[5] Both meet at the intellectual circle of Mrs. Carter's brother, who is in the habit of inviting "every one who enjoys the reputation of learning and probity" to his home although he scarcely participates himself since he is working so much (Brown 1987, 3). The whole dialogue is actually narrated by Alcuin himself and takes place on two different evenings (part one and two respectively).[6] The first part is further subdivided into two sections (I and II), which are nevertheless closely linked.[7] The first section (I) opens with four pages of narrative, in which the first-person narrator Alcuin introduces himself and sketches the circumstances of his dialogue with Mrs. Carter before the actual dialogue begins. While the discussion in the first section of the dialogue focuses on the educational and professional opportunities (or lack thereof) for women, in the second section (II), in which Alcuin and Mrs. Carter resume their conversation after a short break, the debate concentrates on the distribution of power in the nation's new government, particularly the issue of women's suffrage, and, somewhat more briefly, the question of marriage and property. The second part, which takes place a week later, is characterized by a more monologic structure. It begins with Alcuin's dream vision of the "paradise of women," a utopian society which is based on principles of gender and class equality and in which the institution of marriage is not known. The dialogue closes with a discussion of marriage as well as the property laws that hinder women from holding property of their own.

Critics have evaluated Alcuin quite unevenly in terms of its literary and aesthetic qualities, some criticizing it as "an extremely clumsy work" (Hedges 1974,

5 Zagarri argues that Wollstonecraft's text echoes Paine's and thus evokes the concept of natural rights, which he uses to claim the right "to own property, to vote, to participate in government" for men (1998, 207). While Wollstonecraft did not argue outright for the extension of all of these rights to women, Charles Brockden Brown's Alcuin - in the person of Mrs. Carter - does. As a number of scholars point out, Brown was certainly familiar with Wollstonecraft's writings. Fredrika J. Teute, for instance, points out that "particularly Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793), Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), and Darwin's Botanic Garden (1789, 1791) were foundational in the Friendly Club circle's thinking, discussions, and publishing ventures," an intellectual circle of which Brown was an integral part (2004, 151). Sidney Krause even writes that, according to Charles Bennett, "Brown may have been the author of a review of the American publication of the Vindication in 1792" and speculates that Wollstonecraft might thus have influenced Brown's "social consciousness in its early stages" (2000, 377).

6 For my argument I will consider both parts and I will look at the version published in book form, not the substantially altered serialized one, using the bicentennial edition of Alcuin as edited and reconstructed by Krause and Reid. Hence, if not otherwise noted, all quotations will come from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

7 Although the second part seems to have been similarly subdivided into two sections, III and IV, it is apparently impossible to reconstruct where one section ends and the other begins, so that both editions of Alcuin (Lee; Krause and Reid) do not indicate sections III and IV separately. I will therefore also treat them as one (Reid 1987, 355-356).

115) while others see it as "a small masterpiece" (Fleischmann 1982, 7). Similarly, critics have disagreed regarding its nature (and merits) as a 'feminist' text. Due to the different published versions of part one and the fact that the second, more 'radical' part of Alcuin was not published until after Brown's death but also because of the apparently changing viewpoints of Alcuin and Mrs. Carter, critics have had difficulties deciding whether Brown himself can be considered a feminist or not.[8] Particularly Mrs. Carter's ardent defense of marriage in the end, which seems to contradict her earlier criticism of it, has led to some contusion about Charles Brockden Brown's own stance on the subject, which is further exacerbated by the genre of the dialogue, which makes it difficult to ascertain the author's point of view (Davidson 1981, 82; Hinds 1997, 37-38).[9]

In this paper, I am not so much interested in determining Brown's own point of view regarding women's rights, focusing instead on his use of the genre of dialogue. Therefore, I will take up Peter Womack's contention that "[dialogue is the discursive form of democracy, because it means talking to someone in the expectation that they will talk back on the same basis, thus positing a formal equality between speaker and addressee" (2011, 6). In other words, through the use of dialogue Brown explores first of all the meaning of democracy, its possibilities and limits, in terms of the social determination of norms and values; secondly, he shows what an open, democratic discussion of women's rights could mean, particularly if a female point of view were included and taken seriously. Moreover, as Alcuin and especially the changing positions of Alcuin and Mrs. Carter reveal, norms and values are social conventions rather than 'God- given,' natural laws. In other words, they are created and perpetuated in and through social practices. The dialogue as a genre (and a practice) makes that especially obvious as, in the words of Womack, "our mental life is rooted not in ourselves, but in dialogue," and consequently, thoughts are not created in isolation inside our mind but in relation - in dialogue - with others (Womack 2011, 3). Alcuin can thus also be seen as an attempt to help create norms and values in a truly democratic way by including two voices that were routinely excluded and ignored in 18th-century America.

8 For a brief summary of some of these arguments see Schloss (1999, 355-356) and Davidson (1981, 71-72). For a convincing argument that Brown was, in fact, a feminist, see Krause (2000).

9 Leland S. Person, for instance, sees Alcuin as an outright conservative text despite the fact that it seems to promote women's rights (qtd. in Edwards 2003, 288-289). Nancy Rice reads Mrs. Carter's defense of marriage as a reversal of her earlier, more radical position, an indication of the fact that Brown lacked a movement within which to propose his radical ideas (1973, 809-810). Although Anita Vickers sees Mrs. Carter's criticism as a "clarification" rather than a change of her position (1998, 101), she thinks that "her reversal is perhaps evidence of an encroaching conservatism in Brown's thought" (1998, 102). Cathy Davidson argues that the defense of marriage in the ending shows Brown's attempt to balance his discussion between responsibility and radicalism (1981, 83). See Krause (2000, 358-360) for a reading of Mrs. Carter's argument as actually very radical and promoting Godwinian thoughts

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Brown's use of the genre of dialogue explores the possibilities of an open (and open-ended) and egalitarian exchange of viewpoints and opinions. Thus, the "ideological shifts and inconsistencies" of the text (Schloss 1999, 356) can be considered part of Brown's attempt to fathom the new possibilities of democracy for the negotiation of norms and values in the young republic. Using the genre of dialogue, the author contrasts and opposes conflicting points of view with regard to an issue that was indeed contested and controversially discussed. Moreover, he has his dialogue partners change their opinions, a change that on the one hand indicates strategic behavior in terms of the argument (e.g., to make an argument more effective) but that on the other hand also signals the openness of the discussion, which makes it possible to change one's point of view to something that seems actually more convincing. Brown chooses two rather unlikely dialogue partners for his experiment: an older widow and a poor teacher. That these two figures discuss political discrimination, more specifically women's rights, is significant not just because both are excluded from any kind of political participation but also because they represent two people who interact and discuss - on equal grounds - across boundaries of gender and class.[10] Moreover, both are in a way responsible for the future education of Americans, Mrs. Carter because she is a woman and thus potentially a mother, and Alcuin because he is a teacher.[11]

In the following, I will concentrate my discussion on two different aspects of the dialogue. First I will look at the parallel structure in part one, in which the two sections of the dialogue (I and II) are both introduced by the same question but to very different effects. Secondly, I will focus on the final, posthumously published section of Alcuin, in which the two points of view of the dialogue partners seem to be radically changed, if not reversed. What might seem inconsistent at first glance, can also be read, as I will argue, as a strategic authorial move to disarm common reservations and arguments against more liberal female rights.

10 Dietmar Schloss (1999) points out that Alcuin, just like Mrs. Carter, is excluded from political participation because as a man without property, he is likewise denied the right to vote. Thus Schloss reads the dialogue not just in terms of a discussion of gender roles but also with regard to the implied class differences by which the participants are characterized.

11 It is not mentioned whether Mrs. Carter is actually a mother or not. Nevertheless, women were almost exclusively defined through their roles as potential mothers (Weyler 2009, 6-8), something which became even more significant as the concept of the "Republican mother," i.e., the idea that women took part in the formation of the republic via their influence within the domestic sphere, gained importance (Kerber 1997, 41-62). Seen from this angle, it is, of course, significant that the dialogic partner is a widow who clearly has an interest in social and political affairs that goes beyond having an influence in the domestic sphere as either wife or mother.

2 "Pray, Madam, are you a Federalist?": Politics and Positions in Alcuin's Part I

The first-person narrative with which Alcuin opens has by some been considered as rather tedious and long-winded, almost like an obstruction to the dialogue proper (Clark 1977, 38). However, as Cathy N. Davidson rightly observes, the narrative opening of Alcuin can also be viewed as a "monologue in which we learn a good deal about the character of one of the participants. We see Alcuin through his own eyes" (1981, 75). Indeed, the opening then becomes highly significant because we do not only learn about Alcuin's own social background but also - by way of implication - about his intellectual character. Moreover, and importantly, his comments on his host, Mrs. Carter, say a lot not just about her, but about himself and about common prejudices of his time.

Alcuin, named maybe in allusion to the medieval scholar and philosophical teacher Alcuin of York known for being part of the famous circle of scholars at the court of Charlemagne (Edwards 1970, 94), is himself a teacher. Unlike his illustrious namesake, however, the 18th-century Alcuin is not a distinguished scholar or philosopher. Rather, he instructs youngsters "in repeating the names and scrawling the forms of the alphabet" and in basic operations of math in a school situated in "an alley in the city, dark, dirty, and narrow, as all alleys are" (5). Moreover, he is poor, both literally - his "trade preserves [him] from starving and nakedness, but not from the discomforts of scarcity, or the disgrace of shabbiness" - and socially: "The pleasures of society, indeed, I seldom taste" (6). Intellectually, he is likewise starved, having "few opportunities of actual inter- course with that part of mankind whose ideas extend beyond the occurrences of the neighbourhood" (6). Instead, whenever he feels lonely, he imagines company "that best suit[s] my taste," even if that company is somewhat "uniform" and even "grotesque" (6), another indication that he is less open and intellectually stimulating than he himself thinks (cf. Davidson 1981, 75).

Despite this (social and intellectual) solitude, Alcuin views the invitation he received to Dr. Carter's intellectual circle with mixed feelings. Its middle-class setting makes him even more aware of his poverty, "my unpowdered locks, my worsted stockings, and my pewter buckles," and foregrounds his inexperience regarding the social conventions of the middle classes, which he calls "the perplexing mysteries of tea-table decorum" (5). Yet, he craves intellectual exchange and looks forward to the doctor's invitation, which would give him the rare opportunity to be part of a circle of other learned intellectuals. Moreover, his preferred "method of instruction" is the conversation: "Conversation, careless and unfettered, that is sometimes abrupt and sententious, sometimes fugitive and brilliant, and sometimes copious and declamatory, is a scene, for which, without being much accustomed to it, I entertain great affection" (4-5). Significantly, Alcuin's characterization matches the ideal of open conversation as it was held by Brown and the Friendly Club, a circle of intellectuals under the guidance of Elihu Hubbard Smith that met regularly for readings and discussions of new,

frequently radical texts and ideas.[12] As Frederika J. Teute shows, the circle favored open and unreserved forms of discussion over conventional ideals of polite conversation adhering to parlor etiquette in order to further reason and enlightenment within society, a concept that draws on Godwinian ideals: "Godwin advocated individual-to-individual communication as a means of correcting misguided beliefs, propagating truth, and achieving disinterested benevolence" (2004, 153). Godwin also "privileged conversation over books because the former 'accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our disquisitions'" (Teute 2004, 157), a position that is clearly mirrored by Alcuin here. Moreover, al- though the members of the Friendly Club were male, women were frequently present at their meetings and valued for their intellectual contributions (Teute 2004, 159), a point that the dialogue between Alcuin and Mrs. Carter emphasizes as well.[13] Accordingly, Alcuin rethinks and revises his own thoughts and arguments concerning women's rights during his conversation with Mrs. Carter thus illustrating the ideal of open conversation leading to enlightenment.

Indeed, with Mrs. Carter, Alcuin will have just such an open conversation, a dialogue that is exploratory, tentative, and unstructured and thus maybe more convincing than a systematic, well-structured argument that forecloses any possibility of further discussion. It is also highly significant that Alcuin favors the dialogue over other methods of instruction because it highlights his own social and political situation. According to Schloss, Alcuin can be read as a "type," representing the situation of "impoverished intellectuals" (1999, 356). Not just lacking the financial means to pursue learning as such, Alcuin is also excluded from opportunities to participate actively in the social, cultural, and political debates of his time. More precisely, his poverty prevents him from voicing his own opinion effectively - having no property, he cannot vote and is thus excluded from what Schloss calls "the republican society proper" (1999, 357). On the same grounds, he is barred from intellectual circles such as the one hosted by Mrs. Carter simply because they take place in social circles in which he usually does not move.[14] Thus, his preference for conversation or 'dialogic learning,' which gives all participants the opportunity to listen and be listened to, over

12 For a more detailed discussion of the Friendly Club and its aims and ideals see Teute (2004).

13 Teute regards Alcuin "as a mimetic model of discourse between men and women," drawing on and enacting the Friendly Club's conversational ideals (2004, 164). This is all the more interesting since Smith had both parts of Alcuin read and discussed by various women associated with the circle. While the first part "caused as much confusion as consternation concerning Brown's intentions," so much so that Smith asked Brown for clarification, the women's reactions to the second part are not recorded but might have contributed to Smith's delaying of its publication (Teute 2004, 165).

14 His invitation seems rather accidental, having met Dr. Carter at the sickbed of one of his friends (5).

more monological methods such as books, lectures, or formal debates (4) can be explained as his desire for more active participation in society and politics.

Thus, Alcuin is excited, even if a bit anxious, to enter the doctor's "lyceum" (4), about which he has heard much in advance. Curiously enough, although Dr. Carter, "a man of letters," is the one to invite participants, it is Mrs. Carter who actually hosts these evenings, which "became the favourite resort of the liberal and ingenious" (3). In other words, these evenings are a success not despite the doctor's absence but because of the fact that his sister is the one who conducts and supervises them, something which Alcuin himself acknowledges: according to him, guests "soon found something in the features and accents of the lady, that induced them to prolong their stay" and even "repeat their visit" (3). Nevertheless, he cannot imagine her to be an intellectual, independently thinking person but views her exclusively in her role as a housewife: "These things did not necessarily imply any uncommon merit in the lady. Skill in the superintendence of a tea-table, affability and modesty, promptness to enquire, and docility to listen, were all that were absolutely requisite in the mistress of ceremonies" (3-4). Whether it is envy of Mrs. Carter's financial and intellectual resources (Schloss 1999) or narrow-minded prejudice (Davidson 1981), Alcuin sees her merits in entertaining her guests in her domestic skills rather than in her intellectual capacities. In fact, he merely echoes common prejudices of his time, when the growing politicization of women - both during the revolution and in its wake - was countered by conservative views on women's proper behavior and sphere. Alcuin's name, however, marks such a viewpoint as medieval (Edwards 1970, 94). In contrast to this stands Mrs. Carter, whose name relates her to Elizabeth Carter, the famous English suffragette who was known for her literary and intellectual achievements as well as her progressive views, something that Alcuin apparently does not realize (Edwards 1970, 94). Thus, he expects his host to be a character akin to his own prejudiced views on women.[15]

At first glance, he is not disappointed as Mrs. Carter behaves very much like a proper middle-class lady. Thus, when he poses what has almost uniformly been seen to be a rather awkward question - "Pray, Madam, are you a federalist?" (7) - she falls silent. The question is awkward not just because of its abrupt character (after all, the two have just met) but because it is addressed to a woman. Excluded from the right to vote, it does not make sense for Mrs. Carter to "pledge allegiance to a specific political theory or even a particular party" as Justin Edwards points out (2003, 280; cf. Vickers 1998, 95) and Mrs. Carter's reaction seemingly underlines this.[16] However, the question also breaks new

15 Cf. also Davidson, who reads Alcuin here as a "snob" who views Mrs. Carter as inferior (1981,77) despite the apparent difference in class.

16 Davidson views the question as "petty in the extreme" (1981, 77), Justin Edwards as "insulting" and "ignorant" (2003, 280), and Fleischmann as "preposterous" (1982, 7). Krause, however, taking into consideration that Carnot and Peter Porcupine had been discussed earlier, points out that "Alcuin, in short, wants to know whether Mrs. Carter is au courant with the implications of the hot political debate that came to a head in the elections of 1796" (2000, 355).

ground, setting the tone for an unusual dialogue in which the participants take each other seriously and are interested in the other's opinion. Moreover, maybe because he is not used to 'proper' social conventions, Alcuin does not simply accept Mrs. Carter's silence or her explanation that she has never been asked for her opinion in these matters but invites her again to answer: "Will you favour me (said I) with your opinion notwithstanding?" (7). What appeared to be clumsiness or even ignorance on Alcuin's part actually turns into a gesture that expresses his willingness to treat Mrs. Carter as an equal dialogue partner and to take her opinion seriously.

Nevertheless, the widow seems to react in quite a stereotypical manner: "Surely (she replied) you are in jest. What! ask a woman, shallow and inexperienced as all women are known to be, especially with regard to these topics, her opinion on any political question! What in the name of decency have we to do with politics?" (7). The traces of irony to be found in this display of astonishment, even outrage, become even more obvious when Mrs. Carter goes on to declare that "[w]e are surrounded by men and politicians. You must observe that they consider themselves in an element congenial to their sex and station" (7, emphasis mine). It is not an outrage because she was asked for her political opinion but because all women - including herself - are routinely assumed to have none. Alcuin reacts by trying to give a rational explanation for what now appears to be a rather stupid assumption. Provoked by her implicit accusation that (male) society misjudges women's abilities and interests, he falls back onto the conservative arguments of his time: according to him, women are excluded from political matters since their field of experience lies in "the government of a family" (8). Subsequently, Mrs. Carter also sticks to her strategy, using irony instead of attacking Alcuin's argumentation in a straightforward manner. With phrases such as "now you talk reasonably" (8) or "I am glad to meet with so zealous an advocate" (9) she seems to agree with him only to lead him to consider the reverse of his argument.

In this way they cover a number of conservative arguments surrounding women's rights at the end of the 18th century, such as the opinion that women actually profited from the restrictions they had to face as well as the 'separate but equal' doctrine that women and men occupied separate spheres that came with different duties and responsibilities. On some of these points Alcuin and Mrs. Carter agree, for example, that it is lack of training and not lack of intellect that prevents most women from excelling outside the domestic sphere; on others their opinions differ considerably, e.g., in their evaluation of the consequences of women's limited professional opportunities. What becomes apparent, though, is that it is mostly Mrs. Carter who steers the discussion into certain directions by either questioning a point that has been made by Alcuin or by countering it with another argument. For instance, when Alcuin claims that women are not really excluded from "the various occupations in use among us" (12) and that they are, in fact, protected from the hardest kind of physical labor, she insists on discussing concrete examples of occupations in which women are hardly ever found. More importantly, she draws attention to the fact that even if women are not

excluded theoretically, they are so for all practical matters since they are actually barred from earning money in these fields. She is in many ways the more active discussant in the dialogue and she thus manages to lay the basis for their discussion in the second section of part one.

Despite Alcuin's attempt to refute the widow's arguments, she not only man- ages to unmask his points as rather weak but she also brings the discussion to another aspect of women's discrimination that she finds even more important, namely women's lack of educational opportunities and their financial and material dependence upon men due to marriage and property laws. Again, Mrs. Carter does not let Alcuin escape with superficial arguments, such as his claim that "it is not for want of assistance and encouragement" (18) that women's education and knowledge are severely limited. Rather, she manages to guide the discussion to what lies at the heart of the problem, i.e., segregated education and different curricula for men and women, thus showing that the problem is widespread and systemic rather than singular or random.

At this point in the dialogue, towards the end of the first section (I), even the most inattentive reader must have realized that Mrs. Carter might be a proper middle-class lady but that she is far from entertaining typical middle-class views on the rights of women. Comparing wives to animals and slaves, she highlights the extent of their dependence on their husbands and the loss of their identity as free and separate individuals. And although "[t]he tendency of rational improvement is to equalize conditions: [...] to limit the reign of brute force" (19), in her opinion much remains to be done to protect women from a further abuse of male power: "Perhaps there is no country in the world where the yoke is lighter than here; but this persuasion, though in one view it may afford us con- solation, ought not to blind us to our true condition, or weaken our efforts to remove the evils that still oppress us" (19).[17] Mrs. Carter closes her argument by effectively echoing core principles of 18th-century Enlightenment thinking as put forth, e.g., in America's Declaration of Independence: "Men and women are partakers of the same nature. They are rational beings, and, as such, the same principles of truth and equity must be applicable to both" (19, emphasis mine). Indirectly, she also draws on the concept of natural rights as put forth by Locke. In contrast to the concept of rights proposed by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, Lockean rights were attached to personhood rather than other qualifications such as gender, property or the like (Zagarri 1998, 211-212). In other words, instead of being conferred by higher authorities (e.g., by God) and tied to qualifications (being male, propertied, white), natural rights simply came with being human, an idea that made the limitation of women's rights seem random, unjust, and unnatural.

Such an argument makes it difficult for Alcuin to refute the widow's point, and thus he opts for pointing out what in his view is an advantage that women

17 Interestingly enough, her choice of words also resonates with Abigail Adams' letter to her husband, in which Adams asked her husband to change women's status legally to prevent male abuse of power.

can draw from such constrictions. Echoing an argument that represented a widespread opinion of his contemporaries, Alcuin explains that female exclusion from many professions actually protects them from hard physical labor and, more generally, from the harsh world outside the domestic sphere, a claim that culminates in the assertion that "[y]our hours glide along in sportive chat, in harmless recreation, or voluptuous indolence; or in labours so light, as scarcely to be termed encroachments on the reign of contemplation" (20). As Dietmar Schloss (1999) has convincingly argued, this is clearly not just an expression of Alcuin's gender bias but also of his class prejudice. As someone who has to work for his subsistence, the widow's situation, of course, seems desirable to him: as a well-situated middle-class woman she apparently does not have to work (outside the home) or worry about her income.[18] However, the teacher conveniently ignores the limitations that come with such a middle-class life: after all, his own fantasy to have money and leisure enough to pursue knowledge and education does not necessarily apply to middle-class women either. Secondly, and Mrs. Carter points this out as well, Alcuin forgets "the hardships of the lower class" (20), where women are clearly neither exempted from hard physical labor nor from worrying about their survival. Thus, Alcuin and Mrs. Carter talk about two different things: while she criticizes gender inequality, the teacher focuses on class-related discrimination. At this point it seems that the two cannot reach an agreement and thus, the first section of part one closes with Alcuin's observation that "[h]uman beings, it is to be hoped, are destined to a better condition on this stage, or some other, than is now allotted to them" (21), a statement so general that it can hardly be contested.

However, this is literally only half of the story. In section II, the conversation continues after a short break, with Alcuin repeating his question from the beginning: "Pray, madam, permit me to return from this impertinent digression, and repeat my question. Are you a federalist?" (22). What to him seems an "impertinent digression" - their discussion of women's rights - is in fact highly relevant for the dialogue as a whole as Mrs. Carter's answer shows. Not just a matter of party affiliation, the question also refers to the distribution of power within the republic. More specifically, it echoes the discussion about how power should be divided between the federal states and the central government, a much discussed and important topic for the young nation at the end of the 18th century. Thus, a number of publications - most prominently what has come to be known as The Federalist Papers - were published on it.[19] Among other things, the argument

18 Similarly, Frederika Teute points out that Brown himself as well as some of his friends from the Friendly Club "were constantly scrambling for income to support the 'leisure' they so desired for pursuing 'curiosity,' reflection and creativity" so that "they may well have envied well-bom women's seeming leisure and viewed their complaints about exclusion from the professions and politics as misplaced" (2004, 164).

19 Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay published them anonymously in newspapers between 1787 and 1788 before they were published in complete form as The Federalist Papers in 1788 (Edwards 2003, 179-180).

centered on the question of how strong the central government needed to be in order to be effective (Zehnpfennig 1993). While the so-called federalists, most prominently Hamilton, were for a relatively strong central government, which could protect the interests of the nation against particular interests of single states, anti-federalists feared that this would give too much power to the national government, weaken the states, and threaten individual autonomy too much. Moreover, anti-federalists argued that a strong federal government would serve only the interests of the 'ruling elite' at the expense of what they called the common man. The discussion was closely tied to the ratification of the constitution and The Federalist Papers posited this question as one on whose answer the union of the young nation depended (Zehnpfennig 1993, 5).

Therefore, Alcuin's question is a highly political and significant one not just in terms of one's party affiliation, and Mrs. Carter's surprise and pause become all the more understandable as does her apparent 'evasion' to answer each time she is asked: "And let me (she replied) repeat my answer. What have I, as a woman, to do with politics?" (22). However, this time she goes on to answer this herself: "Even the government of our country, which is said to be the freest in the world, passes over women as if they were not. We are excluded from all political rights without the least ceremony. Law-makers thought as little of comprehending us in their code of liberty as if we were pigs, or sheep" (22). She emphasizes that to her, the question of federalism goes far deeper than most people think and includes thinking about the gendered distribution of power in a nation that claims liberty and equality for all of its people. It reverberates with all the issues that Alcuin's and Mrs. Carter's conversation touched upon and thus, their dialogue has so far been more than a digression; it was, in fact, central for the preparation of the second section (II). To her the answer to Alcuin's question is far more complex than a simple 'yes' or 'no,' and her answer is therefore twofold: "If to uphold and defend, as far as woman's little power extends, the constitution against violence, if to prefer a scheme of union and confederacy, to war and dissention, entitle me to that name, I may justly be stiled a federalist" (22). However, to her the notion of federalism includes the question of a just distribution of power among all citizens and since women are routinely excluded from the exercise of any kind of political power "as if they were pigs, or sheep," Mrs. Carter "certainly cannot pretend to" being a federalist (22).

Significantly, in her complex and detailed answer, Mrs. Carter claims for herself all the things that the political system denies her so that her answer becomes her own declaration of independence, which is worth being quoted at length:

> While I am conscious of being an intelligent and moral being; while I see myself denied, in so many cases, the exercise of my own discretion, incapable of separate property; subject, in all periods of my life to the will of another [...]: when I see myself, in my relation to society, regarded merely as a beast, or an insect, passed over, in the distribution of public duties, as absolutely nothing, by those who disdain to assign the least apology for their injustice - What though politicians say I am nothing; it is impossible I should assent to their opinion, as long as I am conscious of willing and moving. (23)

Not only does she see herself as capable of acting politically, she also emphasizes her willingness to take over “public duties” in order to shape not just her own life at her “own discretion” but also the society she is part of An independently thinking and literally ‘self-conscious’ person, she rejects what to her is a position of servitude, even bondage: “it is not for me to smile at their tyranny, or receive as my gospel, a code built upon such atrocious maxims. No, I am no federalist” (23). Indeed, “aw courant” with political affairs (Krause 2000, 355), Mrs. Carter avoids a simple discussion of party politics and instead attacks the hypocritical manner in which male politicians put the high-flying principles of liberty and equality into practice in the new republic (cf. Edwards 2003, 280- 281).

Mrs. Carter rejects a political system that lays claims to principles it does not really adhere to: excluding women from the political participation in and construction of a society that is supposedly built on equality and freedom to her is not democracy but tyranny. In her eyes, being part of a federally structured and democratic society means that everybody shares the responsibility and the natural right to “possess, indirectly, and through the medium of his representatives, a voice in the public councils” (23), i.e., in the creation and conduct of law and government. Moreover, in her rejection of federalism, Mrs. Carter also, albeit indirectly, takes a position regarding the definition of rights as pertaining to different groups in society. According to Rosemarie Zagarri, federalists rejected the Lockean concept of rights because of its radical implications. Instead of Locke’s definition of natural, inalienable rights - adhered to by republicans - federalists favored the concept of rights put forth by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. According to them, rights were privileges that came with duties and that were ultimately conferred by God. Such a definition, according to Zagarri, “limit[s] the possibility for the creation of new rights and affirm[s] the existing social and political order” (1998, 213). Since rights are a privilege that cannot be claimed and since they are part of a hierarchically structured society (with God at the top) women can neither claim rights for themselves nor can they rightfully protest their legal and political subordination to men. Thus, in rejecting federalism, Mrs. Carter also rejects a federalist notion of rights aimed at leaving a hierarchically structured society intact for the benefit of its male members.

Vividly, she illustrates the injustice of the current rules of representation, the gap between the principles (of equality) and the actual practice (of voting), with a little scene in which she describes how representatives of different groups are denied the right to vote, notably immigrants, young people, poor people, people of color and women (24). And although she says that all the others have to “sup- port their own claims” (25) and that she is more concerned with gender discrimination than with race or class issues, she is clearly aware of - and to a certain extent concerned with - all who are excluded from political participation. Such a position is indeed quite radical and all but typical for a middle-class lady as it goes beyond what many other prominent voices, including Mary Wollstonecraft, proposed at the time (Fleischmann 1982, 12; Krause 2000, 359). Moreover, it is

a position that is supported by a rational, clear and coherent manner of argumentation, which is contrasted with Alcuin's much more disjointed arguments, which, in the words of Dietmar Schloss, "strike one as flimsy and far-fetched" (1999, 362; cf. Fleischmann 1982, 8). While the dialogue is an open one in which both participants consider themselves as equals, Mrs. Carter's overall argument appears to be more convincing as she manages to support her personal experience - as a woman who keenly feels the social, legal, and political restrictions upon her - with rational and logical reasons against such restrictions. Alcuin in turn seems to be on the defensive, trying to find reasons and arguments that would justify discrimination against women because of their gender, which Mrs. Carter denounces as "a circumstance so purely physical" (29) that it is ridiculous to consider it as valid. As his points are frequently more of a reaction to what Mrs. Carter puts forward than part of a structured argument, his points seem less stringent and convincing than hers. In this way, the position that he defends, the justification of the exclusion of "at least one half the community" from their political rights (29), seems likewise less and less convincing in the course of the conversation, even more so since Mrs. Carter proves to be such an excellent and astute dialogue partner.

3 The "Paradise of Women": Marriage, Property, and Propriety in Alcuin's Part II

When the two meet a week later to continue their discussion (part two of the dialogue), it is nevertheless quite surprising that Alcuin apparently changed his own position completely. Having, in his mind, "travelled farther than common, incited by a laudable desire of knowledge," he visited what he calls "the paradise of women" (34), a utopian society that is based on true equality. Gender and class do not play a role as differentiating categories and thus, clothes are chosen due to utilitarian aspects rather than to mark one's gender or status. Similarly, the labor necessary to "supply the needs of all" (47) is distributed equally among everybody and professions are chosen on the grounds of skill and talent rather than gender. Moreover, everybody has the same access to education and enjoys the same manner of instruction so that consequently, in all areas of life and with regard to all kinds of topics everybody "mingled their inquiries and opinions" (38) regardless of their gender, again a clear reference to the Godwinian ideals of conversation held by Brown and the Friendly Club.

Alcuin's utopian society seems indeed based on the norms and values of liberty and (gender) equality that Mrs. Carter has argued for, and when he asks his guide about the structures of the egalitarian society, the latter echoes many of the points and arguments that the widow proposed in the first part. Hearing about the ways in which dress helps to mark gender and class differences in Alcuin's society, for example, the guide reacts in a way that shows his incredulity: "Why beings of the same nature, inhabiting the same spot, and accessible to the same influences, should exhibit such preposterous differences is wonderful" (42).

Similarly, he comments on gendered differences in education and instruction as being "monstrous" and he cannot believe that "because my sex is different from yours, one of us only can be treated as rational, or that though reason be a property of both, one of us possesses less of it than the other" (45). The necessity to assign different occupations to people on the grounds of their sex is also inconceivable to him and he finds such a limitation "amazing," commenting that "[o]ne would imagine that among you, one sex had more arms, or legs, or senses than the other" (46-47). Like Mrs. Carter, the guide perceives distinctions based on gender as arbitrary and even absurd. Thus, in a witty way Alcuin paints a vision of a society truly based on equality, which becomes all the more significant because the guide who represents and explains it is male. And if Alcuin had left it at that, Mrs. Carter would probably not have had much to say against this paradise but might have welcomed it as a successful model for a future American society.

However, Alcuin goes on to integrate Mrs. Carter's criticism of the institution of marriage but in a manner she does not approve of. Having misunderstood her criticism (in section II of the first part) as an argument against marriage rather than as a call to ameliorate its social and legal premises, he simply abolishes it in his "paradise of women." Such a radical move turns his paradise of women from the egalitarian society that Mrs. Carter strives for into one more akin to the ideas of Charles Brockden Brown's contemporary William Godwin (Davidson 1981, 79; Vickers 1998, 100).[20] Very much against the sense of propriety of his time, William Godwin argued for cohabitation and "objected to the institution of marriage" as "oppressive and restrictive" (Vickers 1998, 92).[21] Sexuality was quite a touchy, if not improper subject to discuss, and the uncomfortable verbal 'dance' (actually going on for pages) that ensues between Mrs. Carter and Alcuin when he tries to bring up the subject of the abolition of marriage shows this rather clearly. Conservative forces feared that more liberal views on women's rights and equality would lead to the abolition of marriage and, consequently, to sexual licentiousness and immoral behavior, which in turn would endanger family structures and eventually the nation itself (Vickers 1998, 92). As Teute so

20 Davidson refers to the first edition of William Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and goes on to argue that "while Godwin's utopia is utilized, nowhere in Alcuin is it affirmed" (1981, 82). Krause, however, argues that although she rejects the abolition of marriage, Mrs. Carter "point by point takes up all of Godwin's revolutionary initiatives" in her reply to Alcuin's utopia (qtd. in Fleischmann 1982, 11). However, see also Amer (1987, 284), who suggests that Alcuin's utopia could also be read as an attack on Mrs. Carter's liberal, feminist point of view, which he uses to 'expose' the radicalism and impropriety of her thoughts on women's rights. See also Teute, who suggests that "the depiction of free love mouthed by Carter seems more likely a pointed reference to Erasmus Darwin's Loves of the Plants" as it "does not fit Godwin's statements on marriage" (2004, 163).

21 Later on, Godwin would change his radical view on marriage into a more temperate one, eventually marrying Wollstonecraft. See Anita Vickers (1998) for an excellent discussion of the influence that Wollstonecraft and Godwin had on Alcuin.

succinctly phrases it, "[r]adical social experimentation of the 1790s, while releasing women from the bondage of social customs and allowing them the expression of their desires, exposed them to charges of being female voluptuaries cut loose from all rational restraints" (2004, 163). Therefore, only after Alcuin and Mrs. Carter have established "a moral framework" within which they will discuss the subject can "they continue talking, more calmly, about marriage and some of the changes they might make," as Nancy Rice observes (1973, 808).[22]

Thus, it is highly significant that Mrs. Carter defends marriage so as not to be mistaken for a "vicious libertine" (Burgett 2002, 138). However, it is also an important strategic move on Brown's part. Mrs. Carter's outright rejection of Alcuin's ideas - "A class of reasoners has lately arisen, who aim at the deepest foundation of civil society" (52) - has been read as "a moralistic breakdown," an inconsistent change in point of view that says much about Brown's self-censorship in the face of the growing opposition towards liberal positions on women's rights (Rice 1973, 809) or even as a turn towards conservatism on the part of the author (Person qtd. in Edwards 2003, 289).[23] And indeed, towards the end of the century the question of women's rights and marriage, always a contested issue, became even more hotly debated. Liberal views were closely associated with the French revolution, i.e., with radicalism and social upheaval, and that US relations with France deteriorated towards the end of the century certainly did not help women's liberation (Krause 2000, 354-355). Particularly Wollstonecraft's ideas were perceived to promote "the radical - and thus menacing - revolutionary ideas of the French" (Vickers 1998, 92). Moreover, as Cathy Davidson notes, '"Wollstonecraftism' [...] at once became a term of contempt" with William Godwin's publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Memoirs* in 1799, which revealed, among other things, her "extramarital entanglements" (1981, 73). The memoirs not only led to Wollstonecraft's condemnation as a woman of low moral standards: "Anyone who championed women's rights was consequently morally suspect," so much so that the issue of women's rights lost almost all support by public figures (Davidson 1981, 73).[24]

22 Bruce Burgett points out that the discussion of sexuality aligns *Alcuin* at this point to the seduction narrative: "This slippage [between the philosophical dialogue and the seduction narrative] forecloses the dialogue's otherwise 'rational' investigation of republican institutions by suggesting that 'sexual intercourse' necessarily produces 'passion,'" a passion that comes to the fore in the uneasiness with which both agree to talk about the topic as well as in Mrs. Carter's vehement defense of marriage (2002, 140). Burgett also draws attention to the fact that by bringing up the topic and leaving it up to her whether to discuss it or not, Alcuin creates a "double bind" for her: either she declines to discuss the topic at all (becoming herself a victim of gender restrictions) or she agrees, thus endangering her reputation (2002, 138-139).

23 According to Vickers, "Brown, although fascinated by the tenets of Godwinism, had found flaws in this radical philosophy" and thus uses Mrs. Carter as a voice to criticize it (1998, 101).

24 However, see also Rosemarie Zagarri (1998), who shows that the discussion of women's rights continued in the early 1800s even after Wollstonecraft fell from favor with the American public.

Hence, it is more than understandable that Brown has Mrs. Carter reject the idea of the abolition of marriage in order to save her - and maybe also his - reputation. This is not so much a radical change in point of view but rather an authorial strategy to add (moral) authority to Mrs. Carter's opinion. Alcuin is the one who turns radical in the second part conjuring up what to most Americans would have felt like a disorderly, utterly immoral society. Mrs. Carter, however, while still in favor of equality, adheres to the "sacred institution" (57) of marriage, which invests her with enough conservatism to free her from associations with dangerous radicalism. When Alcuin suggests that her earlier criticism implied the abolition of marriage Mrs. Carter answers: "When I demand an equality of conditions among beings that equally partake of the same divine reason, would you rashly infer that I was an enemy to the institution of marriage itself?" (53, emphasis mine). Using again key terms of Enlightenment thinking in order to underline that her criticism of marriage is rational and logical, even necessary, she nevertheless signals that she will remain well inside the boundaries of propriety. In other words, by having her seemingly backtrack and defend marriage, Brown can sell her following harsh and radical criticism of marriage as much more conservative than it actually is.[25]

Her vehement opposition to the abolition of marriage gives Mrs. Carter therefore a very good argumentative position, which she uses to the fullest extent. She points out two major flaws of marriage that need to be remedied: "I disapprove of it, in the first place, because it renders the female a slave to the man. It enjoins and enforces submission on her part to the will of her husband. [...] Secondly, it leaves the woman destitute of property. Whatever she previously possesses, belongs absolutely to the man" (54-55). Matrimonial and property laws indeed turned married women into something like slaves as their identity was subsumed under their husband's. Upon marriage, a woman became a femme covert, which meant that she could no longer "own and manage real and personal property independently" or enter into business relations without her husband's consent (Weyler 2009, 3). Although coverture required husbands to provide for their wives and offspring, it still left wives utterly dependent on their husbands.[26] When Alcuin argues that "the wife is legally entitled to her maintenance," Mrs. Carter points out correctly that "she is entitled to food, raiment, and shelter" but that it is left to 'the discretion of the husband [to] decide, as to the kind and

25 Fleischmann makes a similar point, claiming that if Brown actually tries to downplay his radicalism in this passage, "he does so tongue in cheek" since knowledgeable readers would have certainly recognized that Mrs. Carter denounces Godwin ("that detestable philosophy which scoffs at the matrimonial institution itself," Brown 1987, 70) only to use a number of his arguments in her subsequent criticism of marriage (Fleischmann 1982, 12-13).

26 Prenuptial arrangements that would ensure a woman's independent management of her property after marriage were possible but practices and laws varied widely from state to state and such arrangements were practiced predominantly in the South; New England, for instance, did not introduce this possibility until the mid-19th century (Weyler 2009, 5).

quantity of that provision" (55). When Alcuin goes on to argue that it would be unfair to give women control over property since "the husband is commonly the original proprietor" (56), Mrs. Carter can beat him with his own argument saying that, in turn, it would only be logical and fair to deny a husband control over property that belongs to his wife. In this manner, Mrs. Carter uses the dialogue cleverly to point out an imbalance, an unfair difference between the treatment of men and women that becomes most obvious when looked at in comparison.

Moreover, this point gives Mrs. Carter the opportunity to take up an argument that is even more radical, namely that "a common fund and a common dwelling is superfluous" for a married couple (56). Cohabitation, she claims, will only lead to dissent between the couple since there is no room for individual development, different opinions etc. To avoid discord between the spouses one of them (customarily the wife) would have to give up her personal wishes and opinions. In contrast, living separately would make it much more natural for women to keep their individuality as well as to manage their own financial affairs. In other words, it would provide true independence. As Sidney J. Krause astutely observes, Mrs. Carter here echoes William Godwin's criticism of marriage (see Fleischmann 1982, 11) despite the fact that she earlier referred to his ideas as "detestable philosophy" (54). Similarly, she echoes Godwin when she argues for "an unlimited power of divorces" (58). For several pages and in detail she explains that marriage should be founded on consent and choice and that as soon as both are no longer given, it should be possible to end it. Indeed, to her there is nothing worse than a marriage gone bad, particularly for women: "But if you subject me to the controul and the nauseous caresses of one whom I hate, or despise, you indeed inflict a calamity which nothing can compensate. There is no form which your injustice can assume more detestable and ugly than this" (58). And while men retain much, if not all of their independence in a marriage women do not, and therefore it is all the more important to provide the possibility of legal separation. Mrs. Carter takes up the new view on marriage as an affectionate union rather than an arranged economic one, which became increasingly common in post-revolutionary America (Evans 1997, 63), and follows it through to its logical conclusion: if the affection on which a marriage is founded ends, it is only rational and logical to end the marriage as well.

After the Revolution, divorce had become legal, not least because of "the ideological connections between divorce and the American revolution" as Jan E. Lewis points out (2005, 91). According to her, marriage was seen "as a contract [...] that either party could seek to void, albeit only in exceptional circumstances" (2005, 91). Despite its legalization, however, divorce remained relatively uncommon maybe because marriage was the prime paradigm through which women were defined (Weyler 2009, 8). Another factor was surely that most married women lacked the material and financial independence to make that decision.[27] Mrs. Carter's idea of marriage as a consensual agreement be-

27 Although legally, "[i]n addition to alimony, women regained control over their own property when they were the innocent parties in cases of divorce" (Salmon 1989,

tween two independent and equal partners who have the option to file for divorce aims to redress this. While basically agreeing with Godwin's criticism of marriage, she differs from him with regard to its solution: rather than abolishing the institution as such, she argues for a change of the legal principles and social customs surrounding it. In a way, Mrs. Carter can have her cake and eat it, too - she can criticize marriage quite harshly but still remain within the borders of propriety; put differently, she can denounce Godwinian ideas, which to many seemed dangerously radical, only to introduce them through the backdoor.

Thus, Brown's strategic opposition of Alcuin's radicalism with Mrs. Carter's apparent conservatism in the second part ensures that her well-founded and well-argued criticism of marriage and more generally her argument for gender equality cannot simply be dismissed as immoral and potentially dangerous. By having her defend the institution of marriage, Brown has Mrs. Carter move away from what was perceived as a dangerous liberalism that would ultimately lead to immorality and disorder. It is only appropriate that the conversation ends with her definition of marriage and it should not come as a surprise that her definition resembles that of Mary Wollstonecraft: "Marriage is an [sic] union founded on free and mutual consent. It cannot exist without friendship. It cannot exist with- out personal fidelity. As soon as the union ceases to be spontaneous it ceases to be just" (67).

4 Conclusion: Dialogue and Political Representation in Alcuin

Choosing the form of a dialogue to discuss the various points of women's rights allows Brown to do a number of things that would not have been possible in an essay, for instance. First of all, he can contrast - in quite a 'natural' manner - diverging opinions and develop thus a genuine, even if indirect argument that mirrors actual thought processes and real conversation much more closely than an essay would do. Secondly, developing a dialogue between Alcuin and Mrs. Carter allows Brown to subtly manipulate and 'color' the respective arguments through the personalities of the discussants. Although both are somewhat surprising choices for a dialogue on a highly political topic - a poor teacher and a widowed middle-class lady - the way they are characterized directly and indirectly creates an evaluation of the arguments for the alert reader. Although an educated intellectual and a teacher, Alcuin appears somewhat clumsy, even narrow-minded, and thus his position on women's rights is somewhat weakened. Moreover, he is the one who actually turns radical in the end, in his suggestion that marriage should be abandoned to create an egalitarian society. Mrs. Carter, in contrast, appears more moderate and thoughtful; her calm, structured and rational manner of arguing also imbues her arguments with rationality and credibility. Her distancing reaction to Alcuin, once he has apparently taken over her

484), in reality it might have been quite difficult to prove one's innocence, particularly as a woman, and alimony remained quite rare (Kerber 1997, 177).

viewpoints on women's rights, is meant to show that a progressive opinion regarding this issue does not necessarily and automatically turn into dangerous radicalism. Indeed, true to her role as virtuous lady, Mrs. Carter is the one who protects the boundaries of order and propriety. In this way, Brown can even sell her only slightly less radical ideas on marriage and divorce as a moderate, rational and even logical outcome of the discussion.

In having two so different, slightly marginalized people enter a dialogue, Brown can both explore and promote the practices of a truly democratic society, in which all voices have the opportunity to be heard and listened to. In this way, Alcuin is what Dmitri Nikulin calls "polycentric" (2010, 81): "Any point in a discussion can become its temporary center, and every person is its permanent center" insofar as a "dialogue implies equality among interlocutors and their voices" (2010, 81). The text puts into practice what the Revolution had promised, namely greater democracy for everybody, not just white, propertied men. It represents - in contrast to the political system that was practiced after the revolution - voices of those that were usually ignored, even suppressed. Moreover, Alcuin, as a text, is also in dialogue with other key texts of its time, which are discussed, asserted, and also rejected by the two dialogue partners, which makes the dialogue even more emphatically polycentric. Nevertheless, however openly Brown has Alcuin and Mrs. Carter discuss various positions on equality and female rights, he gives Mrs. Carter, the disenfranchised woman, the last word.[28] I take this to be significant since thus the dialogue does not end with Alcuin's utopian vision - a radically egalitarian society that exists literally nowhere - but with Mrs. Carter's much more realistic, sober vision of a society that is closely modeled on post-revolutionary America - with the decisive difference that here, the democratic principles are not just applied to white, propertied men but to everybody.

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28 Cf. Dmitri Nikulin, who asserts: "In most cases, however, the leading - correct - voice in a dialogue turns out to be the variously disguised voice of the author himself' (2010, 86).

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