“THE SEXUAL DIFFERENCE”: GENDER, POLITENESS, AND CONVERSATION IN LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK CITY AND IN CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN’S *ALCUIN* (1798)

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In the 1790s in New York City a group of young American intellectuals – doctors, lawyers, merchants, even a minister, as well as a few who sought to make a living by writing, editing, or managing theater – came together in weekly conversations as “The Friendly Club”. United in an attempt to bring together various branches or departments of general knowledge, they sought to transcend partisan politics in the name of philosophy, searching for first principles on which a new moral order might be established. They idealized sincerity and frankness in conversation and sought to overturn conventions of politeness when such codes threatened to prevent the free exchange of opinion and the clash of minds from which truth would emerge triumphant. One of the most stubborn sets of polite conventions, however, concerned the regulation of speech in mixed-sex settings: though the club only included young men, its members idealized the feminist writing of Mary Wollstonecraft and others who have come to be known as the “British Jacobins”. They also sought to carry on conversations on philosophical principles with women of their broader social circles. This essay explores the challenges faced by the Friendly Club and its larger, mixed-sex networks of association as they sought to put into practice principles derived from their reading of British radicals in the wake of the French Revolution.1

1 This essay draws on material previously published in Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature*, Baltimore, 2007, Chapter 3, and is used here by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. For other accounts of the Friendly Club that also address the issues discussed here, see also Fredrika J. Teute, “A ‘Republic of Intellect’: Conversation and Criticism among the Sexes in 1790s New York”, in *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic*, eds Philip Barnard,
One of the most debated topics in Europe and America in the 1790s, women’s rights had been the subject of popular discussion in the United States even before the publication of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Still, if Wollstonecraft’s book merely “expressed what a larger public was already experiencing or was willing to hear”, in its wake Americans could hardly bring up the topic without reference to her thinking and, eventually, to her biography, especially the posthumous *Memoir* written by her husband, William Godwin, another favourite writer of Friendly Club members, following Wollstonecraft’s death in 1797. Though a transatlantic backlash against Wollstonecraft and Godwin followed that *Memoir*’s publication, the circulation of *A Vindication* – as an import, in four separate American editions, and in excerpts in several American magazines – helped over the course of the 1790s to increase discussion of women’s education and participation in American public life. As readers, Friendly Club members also encountered feminist arguments in favourite Jacobin novels like Robert Bage’s *Hermsprung* (1796) and Thomas Holcroft’s *Anna St Ives* (1792); in the works of Elizabeth Inchbald, Helen Maria Williams, Erasmus Darwin, and Mary Hays, as well as in French writing by Condorcet and Madame Roland – all writers whose publications were eagerly read by these and other Americans.

A major discrepancy seems to exist, however, between club members’ embrace of Wollstonecraftian feminism and their unwritten and perhaps unconscious homosocial constitution. Probing that inconsistency yields fruitful interpretations of key texts club members


3 Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia*, Philadelphia, 2001, 22. Branson follows a speculation made earlier in the early twentieth century that Charles Brockden Brown was the editor of one Philadelphia publication for women, the *Ladies Magazine*. There is no foundation for the claim, however, which is highly unlikely given the fact that Brown was intensely involved in legal studies at the time. See Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown’s Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*, Philadelphia, 2004, 219-20.