

Fracture of a Stereotype: Charles Brockden Brown's Achsa Fielding

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The Jewish broker or moneylender was often depicted in the first few centuries of English literature, particularly in the drama, and invariably as a stereotype. The Jewish woman appeared less often as a character in those years. However, features of the female Jewish stereotype were established by Marlowe's Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* (1588) and Shakespeare's Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* a few years later. Two centuries would pass before the Jewish woman was introduced into literature in the English language without these conventional features. But the mold was broken in 1800 with the character of Mrs. Achsa Fielding in the second part of *Arthur Mervyn*, by the Philadelphia novelist Charles Brockden Brown.¹ Brown had published the first part in 1799. Achsa appears in the second part, published the next year.

Achsa was not the first Jewish character to be introduced into American fiction. Jewish men had already figured in two novels, Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* (1797) and James Butler's *Fortune's Football* (1797–1798), and an Abigail-Jessica stereotype had been written into Mrs. Susanna Rowson's play, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794). The Jews in these books were all foreign, and adhered to the stereotype. Brown's Achsa, however, was the first Jewish character in American literature to be located in the United States. Brown depicted her as having arrived from England a year and a half before the action of the novel. She is a widow of twenty-six, wealthy, and six years older than the titular hero, whom she

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¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1783*, with an introduction by Werner Berthoff (New York, 1962), pp. 416–17.

marries. She is represented as a fully developed character in her own right and, with one exceptional feature, discussed below, she lacks the salient traits in the literary convention of the female Jew.

There is no documentary evidence that Brown had much to do with Jews, although we may assume that he observed them during his residence in Philadelphia and New York. The record shows probable acquaintance with a single Jew, Solomon Simpson, a politically active merchant of New York who was a member of the American Mineralogical Society, of which Brown was also a member during his stay at New York in 1798. We do not know whether the as yet unidentified "I. E. Rosenberg," to whom Brown dedicated his *Ormond* (1798) and who is described there as a recent immigrant from Germany, was Jewish, or a man or woman. Since *Ormond* was written just before *Mervyn*, and since we know no reason why Brown should have created Achsa as Jewish, it is possible that his attention was drawn to the Jews by his current friendship with a Jewish "Rosenberg."

THOSE EYES OF YOURS

In any event, Brown's treatment of Achsa shows no more than a superficial acquaintance with Jewish life. He was probably as free from anti-Jewish prejudice as could be expected of any non-Jew in his time. Arthur Mervyn expresses the author's own equalitarian convictions when he says of Achsa, "I have heard her reason with admirable eloquence, against the vain distinctions of property and nation and rank. . . . Her nation has suffered too much by the inhuman antipathies of religious and political faction."¹ Although Brown was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment, he does not share the strong anti-Jewish attitudes of leading European spokesmen of the movement like Voltaire. He was closer in this respect to eminent American followers of the Enlightenment, such as Tom Paine, who did not carry over their low opinion of the ancient Hebrews to contemporary Jews. But Brown was not entirely free from preconceptions about Jews. Achsa is probably echoing his own views when she tells Mervyn that she supposes there is "some justice

in the obloquy that follows them [the Jews] so closely." She is at pains to dissociate her father from the traits commonly accepted as Jewish. Her father was, she says, a wealthy Portuguese who had come to London as a boy and had "few of the moral or external qualities of Jews." He was "frugal without meanness, and cautious in his dealings, without extortion."²

Underlying these disclaimers must have been Brown's own wish to make Achsa and her family as sympathetic as possible to the reader—and to Arthur Mervyn—despite their Jewishness. The indications point to Brown's acceptance of some traditional beliefs about Jews, but a rejection of overt anti-Semitism. Total freedom from anti-Jewish attitudes was rare in those days, even among militant non-Jewish advocates of Jewish rights. The most glaring example of Brown's acceptance of popular beliefs is his use of the surviving medieval notion of the special quality of "Jewish eyes." It is through this feature that Achsa's Jewish origin is discovered. One day Mervyn notices that Achsa's eyes have "a vague resemblance to something seen elsewhere the same day"—presumably a Jew. He then says to her: "Those eyes of yours have told me a secret . . . and I am not less amazed at the strangeness than at the distinctness of their story. . . . Perhaps I am mistaken. . . . But let me die if I did not think they said you were—a Jew."³

Achsa confirms his guess and is very much upset by the revelation. But it is clear that the "deepest sorrow and confusion" brought on by the disclosure stem from the memories it arouses of an unhappy past rather than her Jewishness. "Connected with that word ['Jew']," she replies, "are many sources of anguish, which time has not, and never will dry up; and the less I think of past events, the less will my peace be disturbed." She then tells Mervyn the story of her girlhood. She was the "darling" of her parents, and was brought up "in the most liberal manner." She received a secular English education, moved easily in English society, and was indifferent to religion, which her parents did not impose on her. "Except frequenting

² *Ibid.*, p. 399.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

their church and repeating their creed, and partaking of their food," she adds, "I saw no difference between them and me. Hence I grew more indifferent, perhaps, than was proper to the distinctions of religion."⁴

Achsa's untroubled youth and relaxed parental care, she adds, made her impressionable and excessively trusting of people. At sixteen she fell in love with the son of a well-born English official, who consented to the marriage, as she later realized, because he had a very large family and was not too affluent, and hence not unwilling to marry off his son to a Jew and to acquire for him, as he thought, a rich father-in-law. Achsa easily yielded to the one condition to her marriage set by the father of her betrothed, that she join the English Church, since she had "abjured my religion," and was indifferent to the "disrepute and scorn to which the Jewish nation are everywhere condemned."⁵ Her own father removed any objections he may have felt on religious grounds in deference to her inclinations, and also because he wished her to be married before his as yet secret impending bankruptcy was disclosed.

After her marriage and the birth of a child, she was beset by those calamities which cause her distress when Mervyn opens the subject of her past. Her father committed suicide because of bankruptcy, her mother's mind was unhinged by the event, her child died, and her husband ran off with another woman. But Achsa recovered her fortune, and came to America to begin a new life. The book ends with her marriage to Mervyn. It is true that Achsa's assimilationism makes it easy for Mervyn to marry her, but nowhere does her Jewish origin create in Mervyn's mind any doubts about the marriage.

SHE WAS VERY INTERESTING

A number of departures from the stereotype of the Jewish woman emerge in the novel. Contrary to the convention, Achsa is not an appendage to an avaricious and money-obsessed father, nor does she

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 398-99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

lack a living mother. On the contrary, both are loving parents and no less tender after Achsa's marriage to a Christian. Nor is there any hint that her origin is a barrier to that marriage. The text does not support Leslie Fiedler's statement in *The Jew in the American Novel* (New York, 1959) that, at the moment of Achsa's revealed Jewish origin, "the promised Happy Ending trembles in the balance" (pp. 6-7). When doubts about the marriage are discussed by Mervyn with his friend, Dr. Stevens, her Jewishness is not even mentioned. They rather raise the questions of Achsa's age and Mervyn's poverty. Fiedler further mentions the displeasure of the poet Shelley, a great admirer of Brown, at the novelist's having married Mervyn to Achsa, instead of the fifteen-year-old farm girl Eliza Hadwin, whom he loves, but rejects as not conforming to his ideal. "Shelley," writes Fiedler, "could never forgive him for allowing the hero to desert an Anglo-Saxon 'peasant' girl for a rich Jewish widow." Thomas Love Peacock, who reported Shelley's disappointment, had written, "The transfer of the hero's affections from a simple peasant girl to a rich Jewess displeased Shelley extremely." Shelley's objection was based on class considerations, rather than on "racial" grounds, as implied by Fiedler. Fiedler corrected the matter in his *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1960), where he dropped the phrase "Anglo-Saxon" and wrote more accurately that "Shelley could never forgive him for marrying off his hero to a sedate and wealthy Jewess instead of a poor 'peasant girl'" (p. 138). (Incidentally, Fiedler is also in error when he designates Achsa as the "first Jewish character in American Fiction" [*The Jew in the American Novel*, p. 6]. As we saw earlier, Jewish characters already had appeared in the novels of Tyler and Butler.)

Perhaps the most striking departure from the stereotype is the fact that Achsa is not exotically beautiful, as would have been dictated by the established convention. On the contrary, she is quite plain physically. Dr. Stevens, who is modelled after Dr. Elihu Hubbard Smith, Brown's friend in real life, describes her as lacking in physical beauty, though she does radiate spiritual beauty, grace, intelligence, and cultivation. "A brilliant skin is not hers," says Dr. Stevens, "nor elegant proportions; nor majestic stature; yet no creature had ever more power to bewitch. Her manners have grace and

dignity that flow from exquisite feeling, delicate taste, and the quickest and keenest penetration. She has the wisdom of men and books. Her sympathies are enforced by reason, and her character regulated by knowledge."⁶ In short, Achsa is the perfect mate for an Enlightened man of the eighteenth century, but she is no stereotyped Jewish woman.

Additional support for the view that Achsa is a departure from the stereotype is provided by indications that Achsa was created in some respects in the image of the woman Brown wanted to marry—"the type after which my enamored fancy has modelled my wife," as Mervyn says of Achsa.⁷ In 1797, Brown had fallen in love with Susan A. Potts, of Philadelphia. In the fall of 1798, however, Brown's mother had forbidden the marriage, probably because Susan was not a Quaker and marriage outside the sect was prohibited. In November, 1800, *after* the second part of *Mervyn* had been published, Brown met Elizabeth Linn, a non-Quaker, married her in 1804, and was duly read out of the Quaker meeting. It is altogether probable that Susan Potts was very much on Brown's mind while he was writing the second part of *Mervyn*, which was completed in April, 1800.⁸ A resemblance of Achsa to Susan is suggested by the description of Susan in a letter of Brown's most intimate friend, Elihu Smith. "Without being beautiful," wrote Dr. Smith, "she was very interesting."⁹ In the novel Mervyn characterizes Achsa thus: "Never saw I one to whom the word *lovely* more truly belonged: and yet, in stature she is too low; in complexion dark and almost sallow."¹⁰ Like Susan, Achsa was not imposing to look at, but had spiritual beauty. If it is true that Brown celebrated Susan in Achsa, the fictional woman is far from the stereotype.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

⁸ David Lee Clark, *Charles Brockden Brown, Pioneer Voice of America* (Durham, N.C., 1952), pp. 181, 195.

⁹ Harry R. Werfel, *Charles Brockden Brown, American Gothic Novelist* (Gainesville, Fla., 1949), p. 96.

¹⁰ *Mervyn*, p. 397.



Courtesy, New York Public Library

Charles Brockden Brown

Taken as a whole, therefore, the character of Achsa Fielding broke ground in the treatment of the Jew in English and American literature as a non-stereotyped character, perhaps the first in these literatures. The fact that Achsa is thought to have "Jewish eyes," that she is indifferent to Jewishness, and even shares some conventional beliefs about Jews, does not cancel out the total picture of a person of Jewish origin who is represented as a rounded human being. To be sure, Achsa is not a "Jewish" Jew. But neither is she a stereotpye.

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