

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## DEMOCRACY, REVOLUTION, AND MONARCHISM IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

Paul Downes combines literary criticism and political history in order to explore responses to the rejection of monarchism in the American revolutionary era. Downes' analysis considers the Declaration of Independence, Franklin's autobiography, Crèvecoeur's *Letters From An American Farmer*, and the works of America's first significant literary figures including Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper. He claims that the post-revolutionary American state and the new democratic citizen inherited some of the complex features of absolute monarchy, even as they were strenuously trying to assert their difference from it. In chapters that consider the revolution's mock execution of George III, the Elizabethan notion of the "king's two bodies," and the political significance of the secret ballot, Downes points to the traces of monarchical political structures within the practices and discourses of early American democracy. This is an ambitious study of an important theme in early American culture and society.

PAUL DOWNES is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Toronto. He is the author of a number of articles on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature.

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# DEMOCRACY, REVOLUTION, AND MONARCHISM IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

PAUL DOWNES



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Paul Downes 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Downes, Paul, 1965–

Democracy, revolution, and monarchism in early American literature / Paul Downes.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture; 130)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 223) and index.

ISBN 0 521 81339 5

1. American literature – Revolutionary period, 1775–1783 – History and criticism. 2. United States – History – Revolution, 1775–1783 – Literature and the revolution. 3. Politics and literature – United States – History – 18th century. 4. Revolutionary literature, American – History and criticism. 5. United States – Intellectual life – 18th century. 6. Revolutions in literature. 7. Democracy in literature. 8. Monarchy in literature.

I. Title. II. Series

PS193 .D69 2002

810.9'358 – dc21 2002017399

ISBN 0 521 81339 5

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*For Naomi*

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Just here, the idea of a total separation of the colonies from the crown was born! It was a startling idea, much more so, than we, at this distance of time, regard it.

Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction: the spell of democracy	i
1 Monarchophobia: reading the mock executions of 1776	31
2 Crèvecoeur’s revolutionary loyalism	58
3 Citizen subjects: the memoirs of Stephen Burroughs and Benjamin Franklin	84
4 An epistemology of the ballot box: Brockden Brown’s secrets	112
5 Luxury, effeminacy, corruption: Irving and the gender of democracy	144
Afterword: the revolution’s last word	165
<i>Notes</i>	182
<i>Bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	237

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

This book attempts to deconstruct the revolutionary opposition between democracy and monarchism by considering some of the ways in which the democratic state and the democratic subject inherit the *arcana imperii* of the absolute monarch. The monarch provided Americans with a model of sovereign autonomy that might be reproduced on an individual level; but he also exemplified a self-dissolution and mystification that would be associated with everything the revolution had come to replace. This book suggests that the American Revolution initiated a democratization of the monarch's relationship to secrecy, duplicity, arbitrariness, and magisterial madness even as it redistributed the monarch's singular autonomy. The figure of the absolute monarch, I insist, is the American Revolution's constitutive other; the democracy it confronted can only be understood as a political order compelled to translate – even as it condemns – monarchism's attempts to transcend its political aporias. One of the American Revolution's most persistent claims is that it has done away with monarchism's miracles and restored an order of common sense. In the introduction to this book I will spell out at some length how we might go about undoing that claim, *not* in order to expose a lie, but to propose that the ideology of democratic monarchophobia undermined some of the revolution's most valuable political innovations. Determined to defend its purity through an absolute rejection (or exorcism) of all traces of monarchic obfuscation, democratic idealism proceeded to abandon some of the ways in which its own mysteries (mysteries which I have gathered together under the rubric of the *spell* of democracy) might contribute to expanded political participation and opportunity.

In chapter one I consider the specific role played by the figure of George III in the heat of the American Revolution and work towards a better understanding of Emerson's striking retrospective description of the monarch as the "hieroglyphic" by which men "obscurely signified their consciousness of their own right and comeliness, the right of every

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

*Preface*

man" ("Self-Reliance," 38). This chapter also includes a discussion of the Elizabethan notion of the "king's two bodies," an idea central to the version of monarchic absolutism that was contested in both the English Civil War and the American Revolution. Chapter two consists of a close reading of what is perhaps the best first-hand literary account we have of what it means to be ambivalent about the transition to a post-monarchical political order in America: J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782). Chapter three compares the very different models of exemplary revolutionary subjectivity offered by Benjamin Franklin, on the one hand, and Stephen Burroughs on the other. These characters' various self-concealments figure the sovereign disruption of presence that is at work in every extension of democratization. The concealed citizen is also the centre of attention in chapter four's discussion of the secret ballot and of Charles Brockden Brown's fictional secret-keepers. Democracy, while it is initiated and sustained by a revolutionary critique of monarchism's impenetrable logic, nevertheless registers (often with some degree of anxiety) the post-monarchic redistribution of impenetrability in the language and structures of the citizen's right to secrecy at the moment of his political intervention. It is the inseparability of power and self-difference (the self as never fully available to – and hence always a secret to – the self) that democracy both performs and conceals in the event of the secret ballot. If Brockden Brown gives us a portrait of the democratic subject of the secret ballot, Washington Irving, in "Rip Van Winkle," gives us insight into the anxiety generated by an expanded body politic. This anxiety is recorded in specific attempts to limit the franchise in the early republic and in "Rip Van Winkle"'s aggressive embodiment of "tyrannous" authority in the figure of Dame Van Winkle and in the tongues of democratic politicians. Rather than simply remind us of the shortcomings of post-revolutionary democracy, chapter five attempts to show how the resistance to non-white and female voters participated in a revolutionary monarchophobia. The bodies of non-white, non-male (and even non-adult) Americans come to inherit (for democratic monarchophobes) the rejected corporeality of the monarch.

As an "exile in his own land," the hero of Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* recalls the marginal figures disenfranchised in the new republic, but he is also presented, of course, as the exemplary American, the necessarily secret embodiment of the spirit of '76. In this book's afterword, I propose that Cooper's depiction of Washington and his spy (and of their secret relationship) figures a democratic translation of the absolute monarch's two bodies (a figure hinted at in the spectral associations each



Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xi

man gathers in the course of the novel). But, I conclude, Cooper's attempt to contain the revolution within fiction coincides with an attempt, dramatized in the novel, to put an end to a secrecy that revolutionary idealism uncomfortably associates with its monarchic other. *The Spy*, in other words, dramatizes both the appeal and the threat of democracy's relationship to monarchism: Cooper's post-revolutionary America finds itself in debt to a figure of radical independence whose sovereign obscurity can only be claimed for democracy via the perpetual reassurance of its dissolution.

Cambridge University Press

0521813395 - Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature

Paul Downes

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Acknowledgments*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following people for their help and encouragement at various stages of this project. Virginia Rock, Marie-Christine Leps, and Ian Balfour at York University in Toronto; Cynthia Chase, Shirley Samuels, Mark Seltzer, and Isaac Kramnick at Cornell University; Ross Pudaloff at Wayne State University; David Waldstreicher at the University of Notre Dame; Timothy Melley at Miami University; Deborah Esch at the University of Toronto; and the readers and editors for Cambridge University Press. A version of chapter 4 appeared in *Criticism*, and I appreciate their permission to reprint it. My wife, Naomi Morgenstern of the University of Toronto, has been my most constant and careful intellectual advisor.