

The Literati and the Illuminati

Atlantic Knowledge Networks and Augustin Barruel's Conspiracy Theories in the United States, 1794–1800

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La circulation de l'imprimé entre France et États-Unis à l'ère des révolutions

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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**THE LITERATI AND THE
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**Atlantic Knowledge Networks and Augustin
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States, 1794–1800**

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ABSTRACT

Augustin Barruel’s *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* incited the famous “Illuminati scare” in the United States from 1798 through 1800. Barruel argued that a shadowy Freemason group known as the Illuminati had provoked the French Revolution. Americans in the late 1790s inferred that this group was infiltrating the United States. Scholars often imagine that this scare was an instance of mass hysteria triggered by the intensity of American politics at this moment. But in fact, Americans’ response to Barruel was measured, careful, and guided by the era’s prevailing epistemological standards. Atlantic knowledge networks repeatedly validated (or failed to persuasively rebut) the content of the *Memoirs*, allowing American intellectuals such as Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight to spread the conspiracy theory with the conviction of “authority.” Morse was particularly significant as a mediator between these networks and American audiences. By engaging with literary reviews, the correspondence of academics, and the publications of intellectuals, Morse had good reason to accept Barruel’s account. Indeed, the evidence that Morse and his allies marshalled in favor of Barruel was arguably stronger than that which was available to their critics. In this light, the Illuminati “scare” was not an irrational panic, but rather a reasonable response to the evidence available to Americans during the late 1790s. By re-examining this story through the lens of print history, transatlantic networks, and early modern processes of knowledge production, scholars can better understand the borders and limitations of early modern epistemologies, as well as the nature of early conspiracy theories.

L'œuvre d'Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, déclencha la peur des Illuminati qui sévit aux États-Unis de 1798 à 1800. L'auteur y soutenait qu'un mystérieux groupe associé à la franc-maçonnerie, les Illuminati, avait provoqué la Révolution française. Pour les Américains de la fin des années 1790, c'est aux États-Unis que ce groupe tentait désormais de s'infiltrer. Les chercheurs qualifient souvent cette peur d'hystérie collective, attribuable à l'effervescence qui caractérisait alors le monde politique américain. Or la réaction des Américains à l'œuvre de Barruel fut au contraire mesurée, prudente et tout à fait conforme aux standards épistémologiques de l'époque. Les réseaux de connaissances transatlantiques validèrent à maintes reprises (ou ne réfutèrent pas de façon convaincante) la thèse de Barruel, ce qui permit à des intellectuels américains comme Jedidiah Morse et Timothy Dwight de diffuser sa théorie du complot avec la conviction de ceux qui possèdent « l'autorité ». Morse joua un rôle particulièrement important en tant que médiateur entre ces réseaux et le public américain. Lui qui s'abreuvait aux critiques littéraires, aux correspondances d'universitaires et aux publications d'intellectuels avait de bonnes raisons d'accepter le récit de Barruel. En fait, la preuve que Morse et ses alliés faisaient valoir était sans doute plus solide que celle dont disposaient leurs détracteurs. Dans cette optique, la peur des Illuminati ne relevait pas de la panique irrationnelle; elle constituait en réalité une réaction raisonnable, si l'on tient compte du savoir accessible aux Américains de la fin des années 1790. En réexaminant cet épisode sous l'angle de l'histoire de l'imprimé, des réseaux transatlantiques et des processus de production du savoir en vigueur au début de l'ère moderne, les chercheurs pourront mieux appréhender les contours et les limites des épistémologies de l'époque, ainsi que la nature des premières théories du complot.

Keywords

Conspiracy, intellectuals, networks, print culture, French Revolution

Mots-clés

Complot, intellectuels, réseaux, culture de l'imprimé, Révolution française

True villainy is rare; conspiracy theories are not. As a result, most conspiracy theories turn out to be untrue. Because they are typically false, it is easy to dismiss them as the product of deranged thinking.¹ But in some contexts, a conspiracy can appear to be the most rational solution to a complex problem. One such case involved an eighteenth-century French priest named Augustin Barruel. His four-volume book *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, with its claim that a cabal of Freemasons, *philosophes*, and a group called the “Illuminati” had provoked the French Revolution, sparked a sensation in the United States in 1798.² In hindsight, we know that this story was inaccurate.

While historians still debate the causes of the French Revolution, they can agree that the Illuminati were not at its root.

Given that it was inaccurate, though, how did it become so popular? A substantial body of scholarship has attempted to understand the origins of conspiratorial thinking in the Age of Revolutions. Much of this scholarship rests on the foundation of several classic works from the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to mid-twentieth-century McCarthyism, Richard Hofstadter discovered an endemic “paranoid style” throughout the history of U.S. politics that began with the so-called “Illuminati scare.”³ Bernard Bailyn identified conspiratorial thinking as an essential motivation for American revolutionaries in the 1760s and 1770s.⁴ Gordon S. Wood argued that the lack of a nuanced model of causality in the early modern world led some observers to explain complex events in ways that prioritized the power of human intention, rather than more diffuse forces of unintended consequences. The massive scale of events such as the French Revolution, Wood argued, inflated the number of people who were understood to be responsible for them—resulting in conspiratorial thinking.⁵ In the 1970s, especially, some scholars adopted an overtly psychological framework for understanding the era’s politics.⁶ In these accounts, conspiracies emerged out of a confused, even frantic, way of viewing the world.

Rather than viewing conspiratorial thought as a product of ideology or a “paranoid” psychology, more recent scholarship on the early United States relates it primarily to the contingent political circumstances of the Age of Revolutions. Historians Seth Cotlar, Rachel Hope Cleves, and Jonathan Sassi, among others, argue that the Illuminati scare took root in the heated partisan politics of the era.⁷ Others interpret the Illuminati scare variously as a reaction to modernity, a feature of the formation of nationalism that caused Americans to contrast themselves with a fearsome “other,” a reaction to French military success, or as an element in a broader stream of transatlantic counter-revolutionary politics.⁸

Since the 1980s, scholars such as François Furet, Lynn Hunt, Marisa Linton, Timothy Tackett, and Amos Hofman have emphasized the significance of conspiratorial thinking in the French Revolution. They recognize that fears about nefarious plots contributed to the origins of the revolution and the

coming of the Terror. Some argue that revolutionary rhetoric, by its very nature, inspired binary thinking that often resolved itself into conspiracy theorizing.⁹ Perhaps most importantly for this case, another group of scholars has focused on the conspiratorial thinking that emerged out of the European counter-Enlightenment. These historians show that anti-revolutionaries including Barruel imagined that the political and cultural changes of the eighteenth century resulted from a nefarious conspiracy of *philosophes*.¹⁰

This scholarship broadly theorizes conspiratorial thinking during the Age of Revolutions as emerging out of contingent ideological, political, and cultural conditions. Understanding these circumstances is indispensable for interpreting the rising tide of conspiratorial thought in the late eighteenth century. Barruel's conspiracy theory would not have gained traction in the United States in 1798 if not for the distinctive context of that moment and place: rancorous partisan politics, a growing ideological aversion to the French Revolution, and a culture that accepted conspiracy as a legitimate causal argument. But while these conditions were necessary for the spread of the Illuminati conspiracy, they were not on their own sufficient.

Though largely unnoticed by historians, the mediation of Atlantic knowledge production networks proved to be a crucial precondition for Americans' widespread acceptance of the Illuminati conspiracy theory. Even conspiratorially inclined people do not believe everything.¹¹ They choose theories that are not only ideologically and politically congenial, but also plausible within their epistemological frameworks. Many people only embrace misperceptions and other conspiracy theories after closely evaluating the evidence. This dynamic played out in the United States in 1798. For many Americans in the final years of the eighteenth century, there was good reason to believe Barruel's sensational claims. Far from being credulous dupes, many of Barruel's supporters subjected his work to great scrutiny. But they ultimately accepted its veracity because the era's epistemological standards lent great weight to the testimony of the prominent publications and men of letters from around the Atlantic who endorsed the book.

This article compares the divergent American receptions of Barruel's largely ignored *History of the Clergy during the French Revolution*, published in the U.S. in 1794, and his influential *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, published

in the U.S. in 1799. In order to understand their reception, I examine print discourse surrounding these books, their material history, and the correspondence networks of Barruel's most prominent American advocate Jedidiah Morse. These sources demonstrate that without the corroborating evidence that the Illuminati theory's promoters collected to lend authority to their account, Barruel's *Memoirs* would have likely received as little notice as his earlier work.

* * *

Thousands of clergymen fled revolutionary France during the 1790s. Many settled in London, where they encountered a volatile mix of English radicals, royalists, and revanchists.¹² Among those who joined this wave of migration was a Jesuit priest accustomed to exile named Augustin Barruel. After France expelled his order in 1764, he had spent more than a decade teaching and writing across Europe. When he returned to Paris in 1777, he made a name for himself as an opponent to Enlightenment ideas. The escalation of revolutionary politics led Barruel to leave France for London in 1792.¹³

Barruel published *The History of the Clergy during the French Revolution* in London in 1793. This book purported to expose the French revolutionaries' persecution and violence against the Catholic clergy. Throughout, he adopted the rhetorical pose of a detached historian, providing evidence and sources at great length. Claiming to guard against exaggeration, he instead emphasized his care in excluding "every thing that came from uncertain authority and vague report." While his primary aim was to document France's atheism and the cruelty and violence against the priesthood, particularly in the aftermath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the book also attacked Enlightenment *philosophes*. Barruel claimed that a group of *philosophes* had conspired to trigger the revolution for their own ends. Early in the book, he argued that the "seeds of this revolution had long been sown in France by a set of men, who under the specious name of philosophers had divided among themselves the task of overturning the throne and the altars."¹⁴ Barruel's *History of the Clergy* was a success in England. It was published in several editions in Britain and Ireland.¹⁵ Propelled by the Reign of Terror and the French revolutionary wars, London had become a major centre of anti-Jacobin discourse and

print.¹⁶ Barruel's book capitalized on, and contributed to, this emerging anti-revolutionary print culture.

If Britons responded to Barruel's *History* with interest, American intellectuals received it with hostility. This was largely due to the nature of American politics at that moment. By 1794, when the *History* was published in the U.S., American politics had fragmented into partisan competition. Much of this partisanship was articulated in relation to the French Revolution. The Republicans aligned themselves with the revolution and boosted it at every opportunity. The Federalists were more suspicious toward revolutionary France, though most of them refrained from overt criticism until later in the decade.¹⁷ But broadly speaking, in 1794 American elites from across the political spectrum remained sympathetic to revolutionary France.¹⁸

Through the mid-1790s, American Protestant leaders often imagined the French Revolution's destruction of the French Catholic church to be one of its major accomplishments. If the end of feudalism and monarchy destroyed of one form of tyranny, they believed, then the decline of Catholicism constituted the death of a second kind of tyranny. In a 1793 oration focused on the French Revolution, for example, the prominent Harvard scholar David Tappan exclaimed, "See tyranny both in Church and State tottering to its foundations!"¹⁹ Some of the American Protestants who encountered Barruel's lurid account of a victimized clergy would likely have felt that it depicted an unfortunately extreme, but ultimately necessary event. In this context, the *History of the Clergy's* sympathetic embrace of the French clergy and attacks on the French revolutionaries were unappealing to Americans.

Despite these conditions, there was some reason to trust the accuracy of Barruel's book. As Adrian Johns has demonstrated, early modern readers approached texts with suspicion. They did not—and could not—trust the contents of books at face value. Rather, they made *ad hoc* judgments about a book's credibility based on a range of external and internal criteria.²⁰ The most important external criteria concerned the identity of an author and the book's validators. In the eighteenth century, both elites and non-elites generally assumed that truth could be evaluated based on the identity and the status of the person making a claim. Individuals who had achieved refinement, education, and economic independence could be trusted to judge and

interpret the truth.²¹ At its highest levels, the United States remained an honour society, in which gentlemen closely guarded their reputation for truthfulness. To support a truth claim was, potentially, to stake one's honour on its veracity.²² Despite the supposedly deference-defying effects of the American Revolution, epistemic and social authority remained entangled through the end of the eighteenth century. *History of the Clergy* earned a significant amount of praise from prominent Britons and British publications. In ordinary circumstances, this might have convinced some American elites of the book's veracity.

But in the early 1790s, many American readers had become deeply distrustful of British institutions of knowledge production. Believing (not without some foundation) that the British ministry funded anti-revolutionary print, U.S. readers often regarded accounts from Britain that set the French Revolution in a poor light to be mere propaganda. Indeed, because Americans regularly received news and other print materials directly from France, it was easy for them to dismiss anti-revolutionary books, pamphlets, and news as worthless "English scarecrows" or "British Fudge."²³ As one American printer commented, British accounts of the revolution should not be trusted, because they were meant to deceive Britain's "swinish multitude," so that they did not learn "how their money is expended and their best blood lavished."²⁴ In this context, even well-regarded institutions in London, such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, could not convince Americans that Barruel's book was true.²⁵

Instead, most Americans who took notice of the book understood it to be just another example of deceit pouring in from British shores. In a 1794 pamphlet, Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles argued that Barruel had exaggerated the extent of French irreligion. Against Barruel's claim that France had sunk "into an abyss of impiety and corruption," he insisted that France had remained largely Christian. Stiles felt that noisy elites gave a false impression of the nation's religious state. Indeed, comparing Barruel's vantage on France from London with that of a European attempting to follow American events, Stiles argued that from a distance, the U.S. might appear to be atheistic even though the vast majority of its people "would shudder at the thoughts of renouncing their Redeemer."²⁶ At a distance from France, Stiles suggested, Barruel could not know that prominent atheists represented the broader French population.

In contrast, the Philadelphia-based British emigré and Federalist polemicist William Cobbett was Barruel's only notable booster in the United States in the mid-1790s. An avowed enemy of the French Revolution, Cobbett published a collection of essays and extracts attacking France titled *The Bloody Buoy*. Yet compared to the other works in this volume, Cobbett provided only brief passages from Barruel. In his introduction, he explained that "The materials for the work have been collected from different publications, *all written by Frenchmen*, and all, except one, from which only a few extracts were made, *printed at Paris*." Barruel's book, published in London, was the lone exception. While Cobbett endorsed Barruel's claims, he chose to emphasize other works that had come directly from France—an implicit critique of Barruel's account.²⁷ Even Cobbett, himself a Briton, appears to have internalized the notion that a book printed in London about France deserved less trust than one that came from the United States.

Even such modest extracts were too much for Republican Congressman John Swanwick, who wrote a reply to *The Bloody Buoy*. Cobbett's gentle embrace of Barruel formed a centerpiece of Swanwick's attack: "From the musty pages of this infamous priest, whose lies are become proverbial, and whose disgraceful books have long glutted our book stores, our ridiculous plagiarist [Cobbett] has made copious extracts as though they were choice secrets."²⁸ Swanwick exaggerated not only Cobbett's reliance on Barruel but also Barruel's influence on the U.S. The book appears to have had only a modest influence. It was printed in one edition in Burlington, New Jersey and appeared in booksellers' catalogues only in Philadelphia and Baltimore.²⁹ If Barruel's works "glutted" the bookstores, it may have only been because they sold poorly.³⁰

Moreover, Swanwick's offhand reference to "this infamous priest" points to an important, often unarticulated assumption about knowledge in early modern Anglo-America: Protestants distrusted non-Protestants. Rampant anti-Catholicism shaped many Americans' epistemological lenses, leading many to subject the truth claims of a Jesuit priest to greater scrutiny than those of a Presbyterian or Congregationalist clergyman. One anonymous reviewer in a New York City newspaper plainly made this case. While finding value in the parts of Barruel's text "which describe the transactions of the

Convention, of the Clubs and Commissaries relative to the Clergy,” the reviewer instructed readers to “take no pleasure; nor receive instruction from such parts of the book as relate to the opinions of the writer.” Because Barruel was a “devotee to the Catholic Religion and tinctured strongly with superstition,” his view of the French clergy seemed to deserve suspicion.³¹

Barruel’s *History of the Clergy* failed to engage Americans in 1794 not only because of the politics of the moment, but also because American elites instinctively distrusted a book about France that had been published in London by a Jesuit priest. This skepticism also led them to ignore the validation that Barruel’s book had received in Britain. Yet Barruel’s next work, a four-volume book titled *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, sparked a sensation in the U.S. Published in 1797 to considerable British attention and notice, the *Memoirs* extended Barruel’s earlier work on the dangers of irreligion and Enlightenment philosophy.³² It spliced together various quotations from *philosophes* and revolutionaries to portray the French Revolution as the result of a conspiracy hatched by *philosophes*, Freemasons, and especially a group called the “Illuminati” led by a shadowy figure known as Adam Weishaupt.

The relative success of the *Memoirs* owed much to a changing political context. After years of making excuses for French violence and irreligion, American political elites abandoned the French Revolution in droves in the late 1790s. Federalists in particular now considered revolutionary France to be ill-intentioned and dangerous. The spring of 1798 was a low point for American Francophiles. The American government revealed the X. Y. Z. Affair, in which a French official demanded a bribe from American envoys, to the public in April, sparking a firestorm of protests.³³ This led to a reorientation in American attitudes toward Atlantic knowledge networks. Whereas many Americans had once distrusted books, newspapers, pamphlets, and other materials published in London, they increasingly grew suspicious of French print materials. In June, Republican printer Benjamin Franklin Bache drew angry criticism when he published a letter from French foreign minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord that justified France’s conduct in the X. Y. Z. Affair.³⁴ Federalists accused Bache of being a French agent sent to subvert and destroy the American republic.³⁵ As Americans increasingly came to see French print sources as illegitimate in the late 1790s, they also began to reimagine British print, intellectuals, and

institutions, as valid sources of knowledge production. This included not only Barruel, a resident of London, but also many of the publications and public figures that corroborated Barruel's *Memoirs*.

Moreover, the contents of the *Memoirs* appealed more to American audiences than those of the *History of the Clergy*. Instead of recounting the trials of the Catholic clergy—a group whom Americans afforded little sympathy—the *Memoirs* purported to describe a powerful and dangerous secret association. As it happened, American Federalists had developed a critique of secret societies in the mid-1790s. Democratic-Republican clubs sympathetic to transnational revolutionary politics emerged in the United States from 1793 through 1794.³⁶ Likewise, in the late 1790s a radical group of Irish refugees formed another political society known as the United Irishmen.³⁷ Federalists considered these secret societies to be dangerous and subversive.³⁸ The idea of a secretive branch of Freemasons known as the Illuminati extended these concerns.³⁹

But the most important reason that so many Americans came to accept Barruel's Illuminati theory was that a large number of respectable American and Atlantic elites told them that it was true. Massachusetts preacher, geographer, and man of letters Jedidiah Morse stood most prominently among these elite figures. In previous years, Morse had been among the foremost defenders of revolutionary France among the U.S. clergy. He had exerted his considerable influence to explain and justify the revolution's many twists and turns. As the revolution became more radical and violent beginning in 1793, Morse repeatedly assured his congregants that despite some "errors and irregularities," the revolution's cause was "unquestionably good."⁴⁰ Even in private correspondence, where Morse had no need to appease an audience of parishioners, he made it clear that his trust in the French Revolution was genuine.⁴¹ Like most American intellectuals, if Morse encountered Barruel's *History* from 1794 through 1796, he would have likely excused the stories it told or otherwise challenged its veracity based on its authorship and point of origin.

Yet Morse would contribute more than any other American to the circulation of Barruel's *Memoirs* throughout the United States. Shortly after Morse encountered Barruel's narrative, he announced from his pulpit that the

Illuminati had “kindled” the revolution in France and had begun to spread into the U.S.⁴² Drawing heavily from Barruel’s narrative, Morse’s sermon and subsequent publications incited a panic in northeastern North America that historians have come to call the “New England Illuminati scare.” In fact, Morse’s networks of influence extended well beyond New England. While the scare provoked the most intense responses in Federalist New England, it also reached places such as Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, New York, and Quebec.⁴³

The material characteristics of Barruel’s *Memoirs* placed intellectuals and elites in a position to mediate between it and a broader public. Most of the Americans who accepted the Illuminati theory did not read Barruel’s book. In part, this was because the *Memoirs* was lengthy, tardy, and expensive. Stretching to nearly 1,200 pages across four volumes, its girth prohibited its translation and republication in the United States until 1799. But even then, Barruel’s text did not reach a massive readership. In the eighteenth century, bound books remained expensive. While certain forms of print, such as almanacs, broadsides, pamphlets, and primers, were intended to reach a broad audience, four-volume books such as the *Memoirs* were not among them.⁴⁴ Barruel’s readers would have understood that they were engaging with a text to which most Americans did not have access.⁴⁵ The price of the *Memoirs*, listed as \$4.25 in one advertisement, would have been prohibitive for many readers—costing around a week’s wages for an ordinary labourer.⁴⁶

Despite its price, Morse hoped that the *Memoirs* would attract a widespread American readership. In 1798, he wrote that “When the Abbe Barruel’s Memoirs of Jacobinism come to be generally read, all American controversies on the subject will probably die.”⁴⁷ Morse urged his correspondents to subscribe for the American edition.⁴⁸ When it eventually aroused enough interest to be published, three printers collaborated to share the risk and the labor involved: Hartford’s Barzillai Hudson and George Goodwin published the first two volumes, New York City’s Isaac Collins published the third, and Elizabethtown’s Shepard Kollock printed the final volume.⁴⁹ But it did not sell quickly. Preacher Abiel Abbot of Haverhill wrote to Morse for two sets of the book, but added that the “book is so voluminous that I have been unable to dispose of mine.”⁵⁰ Slow sales encouraged Morse to reimagine it in new forms. In late 1799 he unsuccessfully solicited help to publish an

abridged version.⁵¹ Morse also discussed a printer's plans to publish extracts from Barruel's book in his newspaper.⁵² Though it never became a bestseller, Morse's activism brought far more American attention to the *Memoirs* than to Barruel's earlier book.

The slow pace of its American publication meant that Barruel's book became available to American readers only after another book about the Illuminati by a Scottish academic named John Robison. Robison held a prestigious chair of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and was Secretary to the Royal Society of Edinburgh.⁵³ Originally published a year after Barruel's *Memoirs*, Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* was nevertheless reprinted in the United States a year before the *Memoirs* appeared there. *Proofs of a Conspiracy* was far more accessible, at about a third of the length and price of the *Memoirs*.⁵⁴ As a result, while much of Robison's work derived from Barruel, many leading U.S. intellectuals, clergymen, and writers amplified Robison more than Barruel. His impressive credentials made Robison a more congenial spokesman for the Illuminati theory. According to preacher Joseph Lathrop, Robison's academic status made his book an "authentic and incontrovertible" source.⁵⁵ David Tappan also declared himself impressed by Robison's trustworthiness as a "gentleman of character and station."⁵⁶ In fact, a writer in a Federalist newspaper admitted that "If Professor Robinson [*sic*] had alledged that the Illuminati would prey upon the carcasses of each other," he would have "acknowledged this picture ... to be a just likeness of the French Revolution."⁵⁷ Indeed, this deferential attitude was difficult for some to dislodge. Even years after the conspiracy had been exposed as a fraud, Yale College President Timothy Dwight—who stood second only to Morse in promoting the Illuminati theory in the United States—wrote a letter to Robison that fawned over the "unstained respectability of your character" and the "substantial foundations of your book."⁵⁸

Robison's location in Scotland offered a distinctive intellectual context for his alarms. Americans could argue that ministry-financed diatribes from London or the words of a French Jesuit were not worthy of notice, but they had little reason to suspect that the Scottish were tainted by polemical anti-Jacobinism. Much like the United States, Scotland retained elements of radical, pro-revolutionary politics well into the late 1790s.⁵⁹ Morse understood this. In one newspaper essay, he emphasized that Robison held an academic

appointment at “one of the most celebrated Universities in the World,” and pointed out that an “illiberal enthusiast” would not “be permitted to sustain these offices in *Scotland*.”⁶⁰ In fact, the first evidence that Morse ever encountered about the Illuminati likely came from a Scottish theologian named John Erskine, who wrote him a 1797 letter mentioning “A society ... created first under the name of the Illuminati.”⁶¹

Morse continued to research and write about the Illuminati conspiracy throughout 1798 and 1799. In an extensive Thanksgiving sermon in November 1798, he included a lengthy appendix of documents that appeared to support the conclusion that a subversive foreign conspiracy existed in the U.S. from as early as 1783.⁶² A third sermon, delivered on a national fast day in April 1799, included what Morse called “an official, authenticated list of the names, ages, places of nativity, professions, &c. of the officers and members of a Society of *Illuminati* ... instituted in Virginia.” While this list appears to have simply been a French fraternal society located in the United States, Morse used Robison and Barruel’s texts to interpret its motto and seal as artifacts of Illuminatism. Morse also shared some excerpts from a letter he had received from Dwight, who claimed to have heard from a Freemason that “*Illuminatism* exists in this country.” Morse claimed that these documents had been “received through a most respectable channel, and for the authenticity of which I pledge myself.”⁶³ This was a shrewd rhetorical strategy. Morse knew that deploying his epistemic authority would prove convincing to some readers—especially those who were politically disposed toward his conclusions.

Morse’s sermons circulated widely in pamphlet form. Shortly after one sermon reached the press, Morse noted, “An editn. of 450 of my Sermon and Appendix is nearly gone—& a second of 800 is in the press.”⁶⁴ These were figures of which Barruel’s sellers could only dream. In part, this was because they were relatively cheap, ranging in price from 12 to 25 to 50 cents.⁶⁵ It may also have owed something to his reputation as a widely published geographer.⁶⁶ But because he was so familiar with the world of publication, Morse and his allies also knew how to effectively distribute the sermons. He explained in early 1799 that “A number of gentlemen in Boston have thought it might be useful to send a copy to every clergyman in the commonwealth, & have agreed with the printer to furnish them.”⁶⁷ But he did not confine

himself to the clergy. His correspondence from 1799 is full of letters from acquaintances, family, friends, and fellow preachers thanking him for sending copies of his sermons.⁶⁸ Some readers professed themselves to be convinced by the evidence presented in the sermons. A New York correspondent, for example, thanked Morse for his sermon and commented, “Many of the facts were new to me and the authority of others I was unable to ascertain altho’ I had before heard them.”⁶⁹ The evidence that Morse gathered had persuaded this doubtful reader.

Prominent national and local figures laundered Barruel’s conspiracy theory for ordinary Americans. They performed dozens of sermons and orations about the Illuminati and then published them as pamphlets that reached a broad audience. Though printed in a more accessible medium than lengthier bound books or pamphlets, these brief pamphlets claimed a portion of the weightier tomes’ authority by citing respectable figures such as Morse.⁷⁰ In his June 1798 sermon on the Illuminati, David Tappan cited sermons by Morse and Dwight. He laid bare his rhetorical strategy, noting that he was citing them because, “I was desirous of adding authorities so respectable to the more private testimonies of many judicious and excellent persons in favor of the *general* credibility of the narrative in question.”⁷¹ Likewise, after detailing the secret conspiracy, Pastor Hezekiah Packard anticipated that “Some of my hearers may wish to ascertain the facts mentioned in this discourse, and to find authorities for the observations attending them.” He listed Morse’s sermon as evidence that “what I have advanced bears the stamp of authority.”⁷² The accumulation of citations, evidence, and notable names lent these popular pamphlets credibility and legitimacy by creating the appearance that these sensational claims had passed through multiple layers of authentication. An observer writing in a North Carolina newspaper, for example, emphasized that the Illuminati theory had not come “only through one channel to the Public,” but had “come thro’ 30 times that number. ... Is the public such a dunderhead as to believe that all this is fiction? Surely No.”⁷³ For this reader, the circulation of the conspiracy through intellectual networks appeared to be proof of its authenticity.

American public discourse about the Illuminati evinced an obsession with evidence and authority. Morse and his allies emphasized that their accounts were well-authenticated by Atlantic networks of knowledge production and

notable European scholars as Barruel, Robison, and Erskine. Some of the most well-known American intellectuals and academics concurred. By eighteenth-century standards, this was persuasive evidence. Moreover, Morse and his allies had worked behind the scenes to energetically circulate Barruel's text and its message in a variety of media forms, including sermons, orations, books, pamphlets, and newspapers. This distribution not only allowed more Americans to hear about the Illuminati, but also created an echo chamber effect that bolstered its credibility by creating the appearance of multiple layers of verification and consensus. There was good reason for discerning Americans to conclude that the Illuminati had hatched the French Revolution and were encroaching on the United States. As Morse wrote, the evidence that he had gathered "ought to exempt any person from the charge of weakness or credulity who believes [the Illuminati conspiracy] authentic."⁷⁴

* * *

But not all Americans accepted the conspiracy. Over the course of the 1790s, the conditions of knowledge production had grown deeply politicized in the United States. Partisan newspapers proliferated, producing politically segmented information ecosystems.⁷⁵ While Federalists integrated the Illuminati theory into their political worldview, many Republicans questioned its foundations. Yet they struggled to disprove Barruel's account. Because most of the events described took place in Europe, skeptics could only rely on what had been relayed to them through Atlantic networks of exchange. As one critic noted, "At this distance it is impossible to decide on the truth" of the story or the "respectability" of men such as Robison.⁷⁶ Their difficulty in debunking the Illuminati conspiracy, despite what appear in retrospect to be its obvious flaws, reveals the strength of the era's epistemological norms. Indeed, Barruel's American critics relied upon the same assumptions as Morse about how knowledge should be produced.

Shortly after the Illuminati story began to circulate in the United States, one critical observer challenged it by pointing to literary reviews. Reviews had become a popular medium for elite audiences in Britain. Because their authors were usually anonymous, their productions did not carry the prestige of rank, credentials, and gentility. But they cultivated the perception of elite status through high-toned and pretentious prose. During the 1790s, these

publications became important venues for the contest over revolutionary and Enlightenment ideas. Publications such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *British Critic*, and the unimaginatively named *Anti-Jacobin Review* largely existed to attack books and pamphlets that favoured revolutionary politics and to validate and amplify ideologically congenial works. Others favored revolutionary political ideas.⁷⁷ These reviews commanded enough attention and prestige that some conspiracists, including Morse himself, believed that the Illuminati had sought to insert themselves “in the reviewers chair.”⁷⁸

Shortly after the publication of Morse's first sermon, an essay in the Republican Boston *Independent Chronicle* signed “An American” questioned Morse's reliance on Robison. The author described searching the “foreign literary journals, in order to ascertain in what light this performance was viewed in Europe, and the credit which was given to it by gentlemen of information abroad.” He or she produced extracts from the London *Critical Review* that mocked Robison's conclusions as “absurd to the extreme” and “very dangerous.” “An American” expressed surprise that Morse would “hazard his reputation as a Scholar” by attaching it to Robison “without pretty decided proofs of its good authority and correctness.” This author explained that he would “hold [Morse] responsible for the truth and accuracy” of Robison's work, because he had “pledged himself for [its] authenticity.” He concluded that Morse had a “duty to have formed his beliefs ... only upon those solid grounds which he can now substantiate and maintain.”⁷⁹ This author sternly challenged Morse's judgment and perhaps even his character.

Morse responded to this provocation in print. He matched this negative review with a positive one in the *London Review*. But he also highlighted the *Critical Review's* concession that Robison's work was “supported by *very high patronage*.” Morse argued that this was evidence of the work's credibility: “This is an explicit acknowledgement of these Reviewers, that the work, of which they speak so contemptibly, is yet accredited and patronized by men of *great respectability*.”⁸⁰ In the coming months, Morse learned more about the British reviews. He found that reviews of Barruel and Robison were mixed, but used positive reviews, such as one in the *British Critic*, to full advantage.⁸¹ In his 1798 Thanksgiving sermon, alongside a citation of Robison and Barruel's work, Morse added, “The Monthly Reviewers, who are not disposed to give more credit than is due to these writers, admit that ‘the *conspiracy* of the

philosophers” against Christianity “is *satisfactorily established*, in the first volume” of Barruel’s work.”⁸² Indeed, the pro-revolutionary *Monthly Review* had accepted the “existence of an antichristian conspiracy.” But the review also chided Barruel for having “indulge[d] his imagination too much,” and having been “too hasty with his conclusions.”⁸³ While it was misleading to snatch the review’s only complimentary line out of context, Morse correctly noted that the review was surprisingly mild for a publication such as the *Monthly Review*, which observers understood to be a pro-revolutionary publication.

Additionally, in July a writer called “Censor” took to the *Massachusetts Mercury* to mock the Illuminati theory. In response to a quotation from Morse’s sermon referring to the “many evidences” of the Illuminati, he asked, “(where are they?).” Censor asserted that “we have no materials to determine” whether the Illuminati theory was true, but in “Europe, where access may be had to the materials which Dr. R[obison] makes use of, the credit of his book will, I believe, immediately sink.” He also charged, with little basis, that Robison might have been supported by the “English Ministry,” extending a longstanding critique of British publications.⁸⁴

Morse again answered. He responded to Censor with six essays laying out “a great variety of collateral evidence.” His first three essays described the 1797 letter from Erskine that corroborated the Illuminati account, biographical details about Robison, and the positive “reception” that the story was met with by “very respectable men in *Scotland* and *England*.” His fourth essay detailed how “the most distinguished, respectable and worthy men” in America, whose “authority will have weight with a candid and enlightened public,” had accepted the Illuminati conspiracy. In his final essay, after apparently learning Censor’s identity, he mocked his critic’s youth: “One can hardly avoid smiling to hear a young man of *four and twenty* accuse a gentleman of Professor R[obison]’s age and distinguished literary acquirements of ‘*extreme ignorance*.’” Morse effectively asked Censor to leave the business of judging truth to credentialed gentlemen such as himself.⁸⁵ In his response, Censor appeared chastened. He conceded that some of Morse’s evidence “has indeed convinced me that many of the French patriots were of the order of the *Illuminati*,” though he refused to admit that they *caused* the revolution in France. He mildly demurred that Morse had extrapolated too much from

Robison and Barruel when he claimed that the Illuminati had spread into the United States. Censor himself remained unconvinced overall, deciding that, “Respecting the Illuminati, I wait for further information.”⁸⁶ In this case, Morse’s strategy of gathering evidence from respectable intellectuals proved successful in shaping opinion.

By late 1799, skeptics had found a new piece of evidence to discredit the Illuminati theory. An eminent German professor named Christoph Daniel Ebeling wrote to Morse, his long-time correspondent, in response to the latter’s request for an evaluation of Robison, Barruel, and the Illuminati.⁸⁷ The letter corroborated a few of Robison’s points, such as the existence of the Illuminati, but disputed that they were scheming to subvert government and cause revolution around the world. Ebeling wrote that, “What [Robison] says of principles subversive to states and revolution I think to be false. My mason friends are friends of true liberty, not of revolutions and bloody changes.”⁸⁸ But Ebeling did not claim to speak with authority on the matter, an important distinction to be sure, and as a result only offered mild and tentative conclusions.

Nevertheless, word of this letter spread rapidly. Republican newspapers falsely reported that Ebeling had sternly attacked Robison’s character and his book. Republican printer Elisha Babcock sardonically asked why “Rev. Granny,” as he called Morse, had suppressed the letter.⁸⁹ Shortly thereafter, the Republican printer Charles Holt published a version of the letter whose authenticity Morse denied.⁹⁰ He angrily wrote to Holt, “I can assure you it is false. I never saw the Letter you have published till I read it in your paper.”⁹¹ The archival record supports Morse. Only the first four pages of Ebeling’s letter survive, but these pages differ considerably in tone and substance from the printed letter. Occasional similarities between the two suggest that someone who had seen the original letter may have tried to recreate it for print. But the archival record also supports several aspects of another account published in Holt’s newspaper a few days later. According to this story, just after he received it Morse inadvertently read the damning letter aloud to a “gentleman of undoubted veracity and respectability” without realizing that Ebeling would claim that Europeans had “not much noticed” Robison and Barruel’s works, that Robison had been suspected of forgery and insanity, and that some of those whom Barruel and Robison had accused of Illuminism

were “men of good character.”⁹² The eagerness with which Morse’s critics seized on the Ebeling rumours demonstrates the value placed on the testimony of transatlantic men of letters. They elevated Ebeling so that his authority surpassed that of Robison. The writer in Holt’s newspaper described Ebeling, for example, as a man whose “testimony must ... be deserving of great weight.”⁹³ By claiming Ebeling as an ally, skeptics denied Morse’s claim that his position represented the consensus of European gentlemen.

One reason that the critics of Barruel, Robison, and Morse had such difficulty weakening the Illuminati narrative is that they did not challenge the systems of knowledge production that had conjured it into being. Rather than suggesting that the authority of a few scholars and gentlemen was insufficient to prove such an outlandish story, they searched for their own authorities and challenged Morse’s sources. Instead of indicting the larger system of genteel Atlantic knowledge networks, they blamed Morse for his interpretations. For example, one newspaper critic attacked Morse for failing to adequately mediate between Europe and America:

When a man presumes to appeal to the public with that abundant authority which you appear to assume; when he takes upon himself to stand on the watch-tower, and to proclaim dangers, massacres, treason, and conspiracy; when he claims credence from his clerical character, and attempts to enforce his dogmas by the dignity of his station, or sacredness of his title; when he assures the citizens he has vouchers for his assertions, and impresses on his hearers the validity of his narratives, by declaring they are “fully confirmed”—when he thus assumes this dictatorial stile, he should be very careful every word he utters, should stand the test of the most critical investigation.

This author argued that Morse was taking advantage of the public by mediating information selectively and projecting an unfounded sense of certainty. But he or she also suggested that Morse’s standing made him persuasive. Morse could support his claims by appealing to his “abundant authority,” “clerical character,” and “the dignity of his station.”⁹⁴ This critic did not suggest that these appeals to authority were wrong-headed, but rather that they demanded a responsibility that Morse had not fulfilled.

* * *

Barruel's *History of the Clergy* failed to make a significant impact when it was published in the United States in 1794. This was largely due to the political context. Americans remained quite sympathetic toward revolutionary France in 1794. But it is also the case that American elites and intellectuals dismissed or ignored the *History of the Clergy*. In contrast, Americans' ideological and political preferences rendered them receptive to the extraordinary conspiracy that Augustin Barruel articulated in his *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*. But even those who were most inclined toward this conspiracy theory did not accept it without question. Some scrutinized it closely. Yet the Illuminati conspiracy spread widely in the United States because Morse and his allies were able to gather and distribute persuasive evidence that aligned with contemporary protocols about verification and evidence. Propelled by their own political inclinations, they presented the Illuminati theory as one that had been authenticated by Atlantic knowledge production networks. To be sure, this evidence was not dispositive. But it would have been reasonable to conclude that Morse's evidence was stronger than his doubters.

Ultimately, though, the burden of proof fell more heavily on Barruel's supporters. As opponents poked holes in the conspiracy theory and new evidence failed to emerge, the Illuminati scare began to sputter out in 1800 and 1801. Subsequent generations have mocked Americans at the close of the eighteenth century for believing that the Illuminati threatened them, as if they were children scared of monsters under the bed. But within the contingency of the moment, Americans could only respond to the information available to them. That so much of this evidence ended up being false is no fault of theirs. Rather, it simply reflects the limitations and weaknesses of knowledge production networks in the Atlantic world. In this sense, Americans who accepted the Illuminati theory exhibited reason more than paranoia.

The complex reception of Barruel's texts reveals one way that falsehoods became truths in the early modern Atlantic world. Misperceptions flourished when evidence created by intellectuals, scholars, and other authorities aligned with popular ideological, political, and cultural predispositions. The great irony of the Illuminati scare, though, is that the process of creating these

truths turned Morse and his allies into a force precisely resembling the one they so feared. In the *Memoirs*, for example, Barruel had expressed his belief that the Illuminati's greatest weapon was the manipulation of the press.⁹⁵ In his May 1798 sermon, likewise, Morse had argued that the Illuminati aimed to “get under their influence the reading and debating societies, the reviewers, journalists or editors of newspapers and other periodical publications, the booksellers and post-masters; and to insinuate their members into all offices of instruction, honour, profit and influence, in literary, civil and religious institutions.”⁹⁶ Morse and his allies sought to marshal the power of these very institutions in their campaign against a shadowy fiction.⁹⁷ Without realizing it, Morse and his literati had come dangerously close to becoming the Illuminati.

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Notes

¹ Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

² For more detail on Barruel's conspiracy theory, see Amos Hofman, “Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (Autumn 1993): 27–60.

³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

⁴ Bernard A. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), chap. 3–4. See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 40.

⁵ Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (July 1982): 401–41.

⁶ James H. Hutson, “The American Revolution: Triumph of a Delusion?” in *New Wine in Old Skins*, ed. Erich Angermann, Marie-Luise Frings, Hermann Wellenreuther (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976), 179–94; Richard James Moss, “The American Response to the French Revolution, 1789–1801” (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1974).

⁷ Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine’s America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 105; Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 90–93; Jonathan D. Sassi, *Republic of Righteousness: The Public Christianity of the Post-Revolutionary New England Clergy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 79. See also Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 70–72.

⁸ On anti-modernism, see Chandos Michael Brown, “Mary Wollstonecraft, or, The Female Illuminati: The Campaign Against Women and ‘Modern Philosophy’ in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Autumn 1994): 389–424. On conspiracy and nationalism, see David Brion Davis, *Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), esp. chap. 2–3. On French military victories, see J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London: Secker and Warzburg, 1972). On transatlantic conservatism, see Michael Lienesch, “The Illusion of the Illuminati: the Counterconspiratorial Origins of Post-Revolutionary Conservatism,” in W. M. Verhoeven, ed., *Revolutionary Histories: Transatlantic Cultural Nationalism, 1775–1815* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002). Recent work by Sophia Rosenfeld focuses on the political origins of misperception around the Atlantic world, though not from the perspective of conspiracy theories. Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁹ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1981), 39, 53, 57; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 38–40; Marisa Linton, “‘The Tartuffes of Patriotism’: Fears of Conspiracy in the Political Language of Revolutionary Government, France 1793–1794,” in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution*, eds. Barry Coward and Julian Swann (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 235–54; Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” *American Historical Review* 105 (June 2000): 691–713; Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Amos Hofman, “The Origins of the Theory of the *Philosophe* Conspiracy,” *French History* 2, no. 2 (1988): 152–72.

¹⁰ Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nigel Aston, “Burke and the Conspiratorial Origins of the French Revolution: Some Anglo-French Resemblances,” in *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory*, 213–33; Hofman, “Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion.”

¹¹ Scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule argue that selective exposure to information and impaired epistemologies are central to a person’s acceptance of conspiracy theories. See

Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202–27.

¹² David Rice, "Combine Against the Devil: The Anglican Church and the Refugee Clergy in the French Revolution," *Historical Society of the Episcopal Church* 50 (Sept. 1981): 271–81; Kirsty Carpenter, "London: Capital of the Emigration," in *The French Émigrés in Europe and the Struggle against Revolution, 1789–1814*, eds. Kirsty Carpenter and Philip Mansel (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1999).

¹³ For biographical details about Barruel, see Michel Riquet, *Augustin de Barruel: un jésuite face aux jacobins francs-maçons, 1741–1820* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989).

¹⁴ Abbé Barruel, *The History of the Clergy during the French Revolution* (London: Cochlan, 1794), vi, xi, 3.

¹⁵ Abbé Barruel, *The History of the Clergy during the French Revolution* (Dublin: Fitzpatrick, 1794).

¹⁶ Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Mark Philp, ed., *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Susan Pedersen, "Hannah More Meets Simple Simon: Tracts, Chapbooks, and Popular Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (Jan. 1986): 84–113.

¹⁷ On partisan politics and the French Revolution, see Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 5.

¹⁸ On American public opinion regarding revolutionary France, see Gary Nash, "The American Clergy and the French Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (July 1965): 392–412; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute Press of Early American History and Culture, 1997); Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), chap. 2; Matthew Rainbow Hale, "'Neither Britons nor Frenchmen': The French Revolution and American National Identity," (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2002); Cleves, *Reign of Terror in America*; Stanley M. Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 8; James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chap. 4; François Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees who Shaped a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2014), chap. 2.

¹⁹ David Tappan, *A Sermon, Delivered to the First Congregation in Cambridge, and the Religious Society in Charlestown, April 11, 1793* (Boston: Hall, 1793), 28.

²⁰ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 31–33, 188, 622.

²¹ Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chap. 3.

²² On honour and truth, see Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 67; Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masks and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death*,

Slave Rebellions, the Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 31–32.

²³ *Poughkeepsie Journal*, May 8, 1793; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, April 16, 1798.

²⁴ Philadelphia *Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser*, July 21, 1794. On the politics of French revolutionary news in the United States, see Jordan E. Taylor, “The Reign of Error: North American Information Politics and the French Revolution,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 39 (Fall 2019): 437–66.

²⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine: 1794*, vol. 64, part 1 (London: Nichols, 1794): 244–46.

²⁶ Ezra Stiles, *A History of Three of the Judges of King Charles I* (Hartford, 1794), 313–14.

²⁷ [William Cobbett], *The Bloody Buoy Thrown Out as A Warning to the Political Pilots of America: Or A Faithful Relation of a Multitude of Acts of Horrid Barbarity* (Philadelphia, 1796), xi, extracts in chapter one.

²⁸ John Swanwick, *A roaster; or, A check to the progress of political blasphemy: intended as a brief reply to Peter Porcupine, alias Billy Cobler. By Sim Sansculotte* (Philadelphia, 1796), 9.

²⁹ Abbé Barruel, *The History of the Clergy during the French Revolution, in Three Parts* (Burlington: Neale and Kammerer, 1794), ix. See ads in *Philadelphia Gazette*, Sept. 16, 1794; *Baltimore Daily Intelligencer*, Sept. 17, 1794.

³⁰ In previous decades, American booksellers had largely imported their books and pamphlets from London. But beginning in the 1790s, American printers began to pirate and publish more materials on their own presses. Barruel's *History of the Clergy* was one of these volumes. In order to realize a profit, printers would produce more copies of a book than booksellers might otherwise have imported. This may account for the comment about glutted bookstores. See Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation*, vol 2 of *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 27.

³¹ *New York Herald: A Gazette for the Country*, Jan. 20, 1796. Another pamphleteer also attacked Barruel for defending the “glaringly corrupt” French clergy. *The Shaver's new sermon for the fast day. Respectfully inscribed to the Rev. and laborious clergy of the Church of England, by their humble servant, Pasquin Shaveblock* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rhees, 1796), 16–17.

³² On the reception of the *Memoirs* in Britain, see Michael Taylor, “British Conservatism, the Illuminati, and the Conspiracy Theory of the French Revolution, 1797–1802,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47 (Spring 2014): 293–312.

³³ On the public response to the X. Y. Z. Affair, see Thomas M. Ray, “‘Not One Cent for Tribute’: The Public Addresses and American Popular Reaction to the XYZ Affair, 1798-1799,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 3 (Winter 1983): 389–412.

³⁴ *Aurora General Advertiser*, June 16, 1798.

³⁵ *Annals of Congress*, 5th Cong., 2nd sess., 1972; *The Spectator*, June 23, 1798.

³⁶ Eugene Perry Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965).

³⁷ On the United Irishmen, see Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

³⁸ On concerns about secret societies stemming from the Illuminati scare, see Albrecht Koschnik, *“Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together”: Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775–1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 45; Kevin Butterfield, *The Making of Tocqueville’s America: Law and Association in the Early United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 49–50; Johann N. Neem, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 32.

³⁹ As Jedidiah Morse argued, “The similarity in the movements, the principles, and the views of the *Illuminati*, and the [Democratic-Republican and United Irishmen] *societies* ... render it highly probable that the latter are the genuine offspring of the former.” Morse, *A Sermon, Preached at Charlestown*, 67–68.

⁴⁰ Jedidiah Morse, *The present Situation of Other Nations of the World, contrasted with our own* (Boston, 1795), 15.

⁴¹ For examples of Morse’s sanguine attitude toward the French Revolution in private correspondence, see Jedidiah Morse, Jr. to Jedidiah Morse, Sr., Oct. 11, 1792, Folder: 1792 Oct, Box 1, Morse Family Papers (Yale University Archives, New Haven, Conn.); Jedidiah Morse to C.D. Ebeling, May 27, 1794, Folder: 1794 Apr–Jul, *ibid*; Harry Channing to Jedidiah Morse, April 8, 1795, Folder: 1795 Apr, Box 2, *ibid*; Noah Webster to Jedidiah Morse, July 24, 1797, Folder 1797 Jul-Aug 12, *ibid*.

⁴² Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered at the New North Church in Boston* (Boston, 1798), 21, 13.

⁴³ The first American edition of John Robison’s book was published in Philadelphia. The first American edition of Barruel’s *Memoirs* was published jointly in Hartford, New York, and Elizabethtown, New Jersey. On Quebec, see Jacob Mountain, *A Sermon, Preached at Quebec, on Thursday, January 10th, 1799* (Quebec, 1799), 14–15, 22–23; F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 171. On North Carolina, see *North Carolina Mercury, and Salisbury Advertiser*, June 27, 1799.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Carroll Reilly and David D. Hall, “Customers and the Market for Books,” *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 1, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 387.

⁴⁵ On the authority invested in elites by book-reading, see Rhys Isaac, “Books and the Social Authority of Learning,” in *Printing and Society in Early America*, eds. William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 228–49.

⁴⁶ See bookseller advertisement in Boston *Columbian Centinel*, Jan. 18, 1800. Carroll Davidson Wright, *Comparative Wages, Prices, and Cost of Living* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1889), 53.

⁴⁷ *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 31, 1798.

⁴⁸ A man named John Rodgers wrote to Morse pledging, apparently in response to a request from Morse, that he had decided to “subscribe for Abbe Barruel’s history of Jacobinism.” John Rodgers to Jedidiah Morse, Jan. 8, 1799, Folder: 1799 Jan., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.

⁴⁹ Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trans. Robert Clifford (Hartford, Elizabethtown, and New York City, 1799).

⁵⁰ A. Abbott to Jedidiah Morse, August 31, 1799, Folder: 1799 Aug., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.

⁵¹ Zechariah Lewis to Morse, Nov. 27, 1799, Folder: 1799 Nov., Box 2, Morse Family Papers; Timothy Dwight to Morse, Dec. 30, 1799, Folder: 1799 Dec., *ibid.*

⁵² John A. Abel to Jedidiah Morse, Aug. 19, 1799, Folder: 1799 Aug., *ibid.*

⁵³ J. B. Morrell, “Professors Robison and Playfair, and the ‘Theophobia Gallica’: Natural Philosophy, Religion and Politics in Edinburgh, 1789-1815,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 26 (June 1971), 47.

⁵⁴ *New-York Gazette*, Feb. 17, 1798; *New York Spectator*, Feb. 21, 1798.

⁵⁵ Joseph Lathrop, *A Sermon, on the Dangers of the Times* (Springfield, 1798), 14.

⁵⁶ David Tappan, *A Discourse Delivered in the Chapel of Harvard College, June 19, 1798* (Boston, 1798), 16.

⁵⁷ *Russell’s Gazette*, Aug. 20, 1798.

⁵⁸ Timothy Dwight to John Robison, March 20, 1805, quoted in George Park Fisher, *Life of Benjamin Silliman*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1866), 157.

⁵⁹ See Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (Abingdon: Pickering & Chatto, 2016).

⁶⁰ *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 3, 1798.

⁶¹ John Erskine to Jedidiah Morse, Jan. 27, 1797, Folder: 1797 Jan., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.

⁶² Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798* (Boston: Hall, 1798).

⁶³ Morse, *Sermon, Exhibiting the Present Dangers and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States of America*, 12, 39–40, 25, 26.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Vernon Stauffer, “New England and the Bavarian Illuminati” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1918), 276n1.

⁶⁵ See advertisements in *Boston Columbian Centinel*, May 23, 1798; *Massachusetts Spy*, Jul. 24, 1799; *New-York Gazette*, Mar. 19, 1799. A bookseller named Samuel Green offered Morse’s lengthy April 1799 sermon for “the trifling sum of NINE PENCE.” *Connecticut Gazette*, Aug. 21, 1799.

⁶⁶ Martin Bruckner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, & National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chap. 4.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Stauffer, “New England and the Bavarian Illuminati,” 276n1.

⁶⁸ Joseph French to Jedidiah Morse, Feb. 13, 1799, Folder: 1799 Feb., Box 2, Morse Family Papers; James J. Smith to Morse, Feb. 24, 1799, *ibid.*; Cornelius Davis to Morse, Mar. 11, 1799, Folder: 1799 Mar., *ibid.*; Alexander Addison to Morse, Mar. 17, 1799, *ibid.*; Jedidiah Morse, Sr. to Jedidiah Morse, Jr., Mar. 23, 1799, *ibid.*; Wensley Hobby to Morse, Apr. 8, 1799, Folder: 1799 Apr., *ibid.*; David Ramsey to Morse, Apr. 3, 1799, *ibid.*; Joseph Badger to Morse, Jul. 8, 1799, Folder: 1799 Jun–Jul, *ibid.*; E. Pearson to Morse, Jul. 22, 1799, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ John A. Abel to Morse, Aug. 19, 1799, Folder: 1799 Aug., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.

⁷⁰ Indeed, some of these pamphlets may have originated in Morse’s efforts to circulate copies of Barruel’s *Memoirs* and his own sermons to across the United States. For citations to Morse, see John Thayer, *A Discourse, Delivered, at the Roman Catholic Church in Boston, on the 9th of May, 1798* (Boston: Hall, 1798), 23; Tappan, *A Discourse*, 14; Zechariah Lewis, *An Oration, on the Apparent, and the Real Political Situation of the United States, Pronounced Before the Connecticut Society of Cincinnati* (New Haven: Green and Son, 1799), 17. For citations of Barruel, see Mountain, *Sermon, Preached at Quebec, on Thursday, January 10th, 1799*, 15.

⁷¹ Tappan, *A Discourse*, 15.

⁷² Hezekiah Packard, *Federal Republicanism, Displayed in Two Discourses, Preached on the Day of the State Fast at Chelmsford, and on the Day of the National Fast at Concord, in April, 1799* (Boston: Russell, 1799), 19.

⁷³ *North Carolina Mercury, and Salisbury Advertiser*, June 27, 1799.

⁷⁴ *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 17, 1798.

⁷⁵ On partisan newsprint, see Donald H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969). On partisan epistemologies, see Martin S. Pernick, “Politics, Parties, and Pestilence: Epidemic Yellow Fever in Philadelphia and the Rise of the First Party System,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (Oct. 1972): 559–86.

⁷⁶ *Massachusetts Mercury*, July 27, 1798.

⁷⁷ Emily Lorraine De Montluzin, “Jacobinism and the Reviewers: The English Literary Periodicals as Organs of Anti-Jacobin Propaganda, 1792–1832,” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1974).

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- ⁷⁸ Parish, *An Oration Delivered at Byfield*, 8.
- ⁷⁹ *Boston Independent Chronicle*, May 28, 1798.
- ⁸⁰ *Boston Independent Chronicle*, June 18, 1798.
- ⁸¹ *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 10, 1798. On the reviewers' reception of Barruel, see Taylor, "British Conservatism," 295–97; Hofman, "Opinion, Illusion," 30. For a positive review, see *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 83 (London: Nichols, 1798), 38–39.
- ⁸² Morse, *Sermon, Preached at Charlestown*, 20.
- ⁸³ *The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal Enlarged*, 2nd ser., vol. 23 (London: Griffiths, 1797), 532.
- ⁸⁴ *Massachusetts Mercury*, Jul. 27, 1798. Note: I use male pronouns here because Censor's gender was established over the course of the exchange.
- ⁸⁵ Though he carried himself as an older man, Morse himself was only in his late thirties at this time.
- ⁸⁶ See essays in *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 3, 10, 14, 17, 21, 28, 31, 1798.
- ⁸⁷ Ebeling, a fellow geographer, had corresponded with Morse over time in order to exchange geographic information. See C. D. Ebeling to Jedidiah Morse, June 28 1795, Folder: 1795 June, Box 2, Morse Family Papers; Ebeling to Morse, Apr. 26, 1796, Folder: 1796 Apr., *ibid.*; Ebeling to Morse, Oct. 4, 1796, Folder: 1796 Oct.–Dec., *ibid.*; Ebeling to Morse, Aug. 24, 1797, Folder: 1797 Aug. 22–31, *ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ C. D. Ebeling to Jedidiah Morse, Mar. 20, 1799, Folder: March 1799, Box 2, Morse Family Papers.
- ⁸⁹ *American Mercury*, Sept. 26, 1799.
- ⁹⁰ *New London Bee*, Nov. 20, 27, Dec. 4, 1799.
- ⁹¹ Jedidiah Morse to Charles Holt, Dec. 2, 1799, Folder: 1799 Nov., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.
- ⁹² According to this narrative, Morse showed "violent marks of chagrin and disappointment," and exclaimed that Ebeling must himself be an Illuminatus. After the visitor left Morse, he described the letter to friends, one of whom wrote Morse to ask for a copy. Morse provided some extracts but extenuated them by noting that Ebeling's "opinions of the French revolution are very different from yours and mine." See *New London Bee*, Dec. 18, 1799. It is impossible to verify the entire account, but much of it is corroborated by Morse's private correspondence. Morse suspected that Connecticut native Samuel Huntington, Jr., whom he had told about the letter, had spread the story to the state's newspaper printers. See Jedidiah Morse to Samuel Huntington, Jr., Dec. 2, 1799, Folder: 1799 Nov., Box 2, Morse Family Papers. Moreover, Morse did copy some portions of the Ebeling letter to a man named Walter King, and noted, "The fact is Prof. Ebeling thinks quite differently of the French Revolution, its principles, &c. from what you and I

do.” While Morse reiterated his respect for Ebeling, he noted that considering that the German was “a little enthusiastic in favor of liberty,” the limitations of his critiques “has tended to confirm” Morse’s belief in Robison and Barruel. Jedidiah Morse to Walter King, Aug. 16, 1799, Folder: 1799 Jun–Jul., Box 2, Morse Family Papers.

⁹³ *New London Bee*, Dec. 18, 1799.

⁹⁴ *Independent Chronicle*, May 30, 1799.

⁹⁵ Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, vol. 1 (London, 1798), 244.

⁹⁶ Morse, *A Sermon, Delivered at New North Church*, 22–23.

⁹⁷ Some Republican critics made a similar charge. See Alan V. Briceland, “The Philadelphia Aurora, the New England Illuminati, and the Election of 1800,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (Jan. 1976): 23.

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