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*The Case of “Who’s Looney Now?”:
Psychologists, Psychiatrists, the Public, and Contested Notions of Insanity in Turn-
of-the-Twentieth Century America*

By

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Honors Thesis

In

*Department of History
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INTRODUCTION

No doubt, “eccentric” is one word that describes John Armstrong Chaloner, a lawyer, entrepreneur, anti-Spiritualist, “scientific” medium, millionaire heir to the fur-trading fortune of John Jacob Astor, and, at one point, an incurably insane paranoiac. After he married and amicably divorced the Virginian novelist Amélie Rives, in 1888 and 1895 respectively, Chaloner discovered he could communicate with his subconscious, his “X-Faculty” as he named it, using a planchette, an early form of a Ouija board. He claimed to have changed his own eye color from brown to grey using this strange X-Faculty and boasted about winning \$600 off of a stock market tip from it. He believed it directed him to go into a trance in which his facial features would appear to be exact copies of those of Napoleon Bonaparte.¹ By the time he burned his hands carrying hot coals he claimed his X-faculty said he could safely transport, Chaloner’s family and friends had begun to question his sanity.²

Chaloner was involuntarily committed to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum in 1897 by two of his brothers and a cousin, causing his legal sanity to be in flux for nearly twenty years. Officially, he was declared legally *insane* in the state of New York in 1899, pronounced legally *sane* in Virginia in 1901, and ultimately affirmed sane in New York in 1919 after twenty years of legal battles. These battles reveal the understandings and definitions of insanity that Bloomingdale’s psychiatrists used to declare Chaloner insane in contrast to the arguments used by other scientific men, especially psychologists, to oppose this label. The battles served as an

¹ J. Bryan III. “Johnny Jackanapes, the Merry-Andrew of the Merry Mills: A Brief Biography of John Armstrong Chaloner.” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 73 (1965), 5-6.

² Lately Thomas, *A Pride of Lions: The Astor Orphans; The Chanler Chronicle*, William Morrow & Company, Inc.: New York, 1971, 205.

arena in which psychologists successfully inserted their opinions into an area normally reserved for psychiatrists and lunacy examiners.

For three and a half years, John Armstrong Chaloner was confined to the grounds of Bloomingdale Insane Asylum in White Plains, New York, a private hospital for the insane, founded by the New York Hospital. At his initial sanity trial in 1899, two expert examiners in “lunacy,” Drs. Carlos F. MacDonald and Austin Flint, asserted that Chaloner was an incurably insane paranoiac in need of permanent institutionalization. But Chaloner, believing that he was a sane man unjustly committed, planned and executed an escape from Bloomingdale on Thanksgiving Eve, 1901. He fled to Philadelphia under an alias and checked into the clinic of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a famous and well-respected neurologist of the period. Chaloner’s choice of clinic proved to be apt, since it enabled him to meet or correspond with some of the leading neurologists and psychologists of the day, including William James, Joseph Jastrow, H.C. Wood, and Thomson Jay Hudson. Two in particular stand out. William James, M.D. and a Harvard professor, became an authority on psychology in the late nineteenth century, particularly after publishing in 1890 the classic psychology text, *The Principles of Psychology*. Joseph Jastrow was a renowned experimental psychologist based out of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The author of *Fact and Fable of Psychology* (1900), he was a vociferous opponent of spiritualist mediums. From these men, including other neurologists and psychologists, Chaloner received several legitimate medical and psychological opinions in support of his sanity, which would form the backbone of his case against the diagnoses of him as an incurably insane paranoiac.

How could one “expert examiner in lunacy,” Dr. MacDonald, pronounce a man to be the “most typical classical case of paranoia” he had ever seen, while one of the most respected American psychologists of the period, William James, could declare the same man was

“intellectually sound,” averring that “further treatment of him as a lunatic would seem a crime”?³ One answer to this question can be found in the inconsistent and contested definitions of insanity in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Chaloner’s commitment to Bloomingdale occurred during a period when psychological and psychiatric conceptions of “insanity” were at odds.⁴ The public too became aware of the inconsistent diagnosis of insanity and of psychiatrists’ power over the fate of their patients through their own experiences with asylums and commitment procedures, as well as through newspaper coverage of the changing understanding of insanity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Spiritualist movement played a role in the beginnings of psychology’s battle to become a legitimate scientific field of research and study, as psychologists sought to separate psychology from philosophy by pursuing the study of the human mind according to the scientific method. One of the pioneers of American psychology, William James, worked tirelessly both to further psychology’s place in academia and pursue more controversial research into such psychical phenomena as spiritualist mediums’ claims that they could communicate with spirits of the dead. Psychologists believed that the human mind did have some form of unconscious or subconscious, and this became a focus of psychological experimentation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chaloner was also a producer of theories too, drawing his ideas from a range of movements. The most influential movement was that of experimental psychology, a field of study that was becoming popular among American psychologists, including William James and Joseph Jastrow, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After his discovery of his

³ William James, “Statement,” in John Armstrong Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law Or The Battle of the Millionaires A Play in Three Acts and Three Scenes Time, 1887: Treating the Adventures of the Author of “Who’s Looney Now?”* Roanoke Rapids, NC: Palmetto Press, 1914, 159.

⁴ Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion*, 143.

subconscious faculty, Chaloner experimented with his ability to go into an alternate mental state in which he wrote messages from his subconscious state, a practice known as “graphic automatism” or automatic writing. But another movement Chaloner drew from, even as he critiqued it, was Spiritualism. Chaloner, though he had a much more negative view of Spiritualism than James, was cognizant of the public’s interest in it, and used spiritual terminology to help publicize the works he wrote and published following his institutionalization in Bloomingdale. He also used the question of his sanity to publicize his works; he particularly capitalized on the phrase “Who’s looney now?,” a question he had directed to his brother Robert Chanler, a signer of Chaloner’s commitment papers to Bloomingdale, upon Robert’s financially devastating divorce from the famous opera singer Lina Cavalieri.⁵

Although Chaloner would not contribute any significant texts to psychology or experimental psychology, his story reveals how the academic and medical communities, both trying to be increasingly “scientific,” fought between and amongst themselves about the definition of insanity as a disease, as well as about the more specific diagnostic definitions of different kinds of insanity, such as “paranoia” in Chaloner’s case. The conflicts between psychologists, working for the recognition of psychology as a professional and academic discipline, and psychiatrists, seeking to disconnect their profession from its identification with asylums and reorient their focus to medical science, illuminate the vague, contradictory, and subjective understanding of insanity as a disease in turn-of-the-twentieth century America.

These issues, however, extended beyond the academic and scientific communities, and resonated with the American public. The current historiography concerning conceptions, definitions, and understandings of madness in America at the turn of the twentieth century

⁵ “Saunterings,” *Goodwin’s Weekly*, Salt Lake City, UT, September 17, 1910, 13.

neglects the public's reaction to changing definitions of insanity, especially expressed in newspaper articles. Celebrity insanity cases such as Chaloner's provided a public forum in which psychology and psychiatry's respective scientific and theoretical boundaries took shape. These disciplines were "made" not only in academic journals, hospitals, universities, and asylums; they were created in the public arena—in newspapers, trials, and popular amateur treatises such as those of Chaloner himself. Thus, Chaloner's case gives us access to all aspects of this battle. While it was just one of many in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, it provides us with a more complete picture of the transformation of treatment and diagnosis of insanity, the professionalization of psychology and psychiatry, and the larger cultural concern with misdiagnoses of insanity and unjust incarcerations of sane people in insane asylums.

CHAPTER 1:

THE WORLD THAT MADE CHALONER (1862—1897)

“You will see the Ideal abode of a modern philosopher, of one who joins the Ideals of Greek Thought with the electric methods of modern success. The cast of a Greek bust or Statue will meet you at every turn, paintings give colour to the walls, and a telephone in the basement (under my feet as I sit in my library) gives touch with Wall Street and The World.”

—John Armstrong Chaloner to W. Gordon McCabe, October 10, 1896

Although Margaret Astor Ward Chanler and John Winthrop Chanler could not have foreseen the path that their eldest son’s life would take when John Armstrong Chanler (Chaloner)^{6†} was born on October 10, 1862 in New York City, mental excitement, strong personalities, and even insanity were not uncommon in Chaloner’s ancestors. One of the first Chanlers to settle in America during the eighteenth century was Isaac Chanler Jr., who after studying in Europe, earned a medical degree at the University of Edinburgh with a thesis focused on the causes and characterization of hysteria as a mental disease⁷ His mother’s family, too, had a record of mental instability, and even insanity. Chaloner’s great-uncle John Jacob Astor Jr. was considered to be an imbecile and mentally unstable⁸ John Armstrong’s siblings were also peculiar in their own ways, and each of them had no qualms about arguing over philosophical subjects or fighting with the others. Although Chaloner grew up largely apart from his siblings since he went off to boarding school while the others were still young, his younger brothers, Winthrop “Wintie” Astor Chanler, William Astor Chanler, Lewis Stuyvesant Chanler, and

[†] In order to separate himself from his family, John Armstrong Chanler legally changed his last name on June 1st, 1908 to Chaloner. Chaloner explained this change as a means to assert his emotional and legal separation from his family, and justified the new spelling by claiming that he was merely returning the family name to its original historical spelling. Because this is the name he is more commonly referred to by, I have used “Chaloner” throughout this work.

⁶ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

Robert Winthrop Chanler had a love-hate relationship with him, although conflict was more common than peace.⁹ Sibling wrestling and screaming matches in childhood transformed during their adult years into witty verbal altercations and invective-filled letters, primarily about family finances and perceived personal insults. As the eldest male of ten children, Chaloner gained significant control over his family's wealth—coming primarily from John Jacob Astor's fortune made in the fur trade—when he came of age. His siblings' concern for the family's financial future would later be seen by Chaloner as a primary motivation for his family's decision to commit him to Bloomingdale.

Sibling quarrels extended into the world of business. In 1893, Chaloner and his brother Winthrop established the Roanoke Rapids Power Company, a joint business venture near Weldon, North Carolina. Of the two brothers, Chaloner took a much greater interest in Roanoke Rapids, frequently visiting the town and funding various projects in hope of increasing its production and growth. He also pursued the creation and patenting of an accessory for sewing machines that made them self-threading.¹⁰ Typical of their relationship, Winthrop and Chaloner had frequent disagreements about how to most effectively run the power company, which often included arguments about Chaloner spending his part of the Astor family fortune.¹¹ At a meeting in December 1896, Chaloner and Winthrop reportedly almost came to blows; from that point on, the two brothers agreed to communicate in writing or through a third party.¹² Adding to the conflict, Winthrop, at Chaloner's request in January of 1897, resigned as the president of the United Industrial Company, a company that the two brothers had created in order to operate the

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹¹ Ibid., 201-202.

¹² Ibid., 202.

mills at Roanoke Rapids.¹³ Although Chaloner elected himself president of the company after Winthrop resigned, he tired of the business world and wanted to take a break to work further on his psychological experiments at his Virginia estate, The Merry Mills.¹⁴

Family disagreement involving Chaloner, however, was not limited to financial disputes. All of the Chanlers were easily insulted, especially when it came to family matters, and one event, John Armstrong's absence from his sister Alida's wedding in 1896, caused particular turmoil. Chaloner had, at the last minute, telegraphed his brothers and sisters that he could not attend Alida's wedding because he was ill with pleurisy, an inflammation of the lining of the lungs.¹⁵ Although he sent Alida his blessing and a wedding gift, the rest of his brothers and sisters were outraged that he did not do everything within his power to attend the wedding.¹⁶ When Winthrop exclaimed, "The man is daft!" Robert expressed a similar sentiment, that Chaloner must be "looney" not to attend his sister's wedding.¹⁷ While not yet a formal challenge to his brother's sanity, Robert's declaration revealed the increasing distrust Chaloner's family had of his judgment and temperament.

EDUCATION: INTELLECTUAL & CULTURAL

John Armstrong Chaloner's academic interests also contributed significantly to his intellectual formation and understanding of the world. In 1883, he earned a bachelor's, and in 1884 a master's degree in philosophy from Columbia University. Here Chaloner's interest with psychology began. Since the field was just beginning to become an academic discipline, it was

¹³ Ibid., 202.

¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹⁵ Ibid., 196.

¹⁶ Ibid., 196.

¹⁷ Ibid., 196.

still discussed theoretically as a subfield of philosophy; at Columbia University, the academic field of psychology did not separate from philosophy and fully arrive until 1891, several years after Chaloner studied psychology there.¹⁸ Chaloner would have been taught by Archibald Alexander, a trained philosopher who served as Columbia's only professor of psychology in the 1880s who taught a fledgling psychology lacking the necessary experimental or quantitative focus necessary to make it a "scientific" discipline.¹⁹ Chaloner did not give much credit to his Columbia education for its impact on his interest in psychology, however, as he cited his 1896 reading of Thomson Jay Hudson's *The Law of Psychic Phenomena* (1895) as the work that spurred his interest in "modern" psychology.²⁰

After earning these degrees, Chaloner, always looking to advance his knowledge and satisfy his intellectual curiosity, took law classes and became a member of the New York Bar in 1885. But, he put neither his degrees nor his bar membership to much immediate use; he went out West for several months where he tagged along with General George Crooke's troops as they searched for the Apache Indian chief Geronimo, and then traveled to Europe, visiting London and Paris.²¹ Both of these trips show Chaloner followed a path set out for young white men of his generation. On the one hand, a young white male in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America was expected to be civilized and cultured, taking a European grand tour, while on the other hand, was

¹⁸ Robert A. McCaughey. *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 198.

¹⁹ McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 198.

²⁰ John Armstrong Chaloner. *The X-Faculty, or, the Pythagorean Triangle of Psychology*. Roanoke Rapids, NC: Palmetto Press, 1911, 8.

²¹ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 65.

pressured to show his manliness and power to assert the superiority of the white race over that of indigenous and colored people.²²

On his voyage to Europe, Chaloner had as his guide to European art, the wealthy and influential architect Stanford White. In 1879, White had founded the architectural firm McKim, Mead, and White and had begun to remake American architecture along the lines of classical design and the French Beaux-Arts. White almost certainly became a fixture in Chaloner's life when the two were bachelors in New York and frequented the same social clubs. In 1890, White and Augustus St. Gaudens, his business partner, sculptor, and friend, persuaded Chaloner, to fund a scholarship for promising young American artists to study abroad in Paris.²³ Chaloner, glad to support the arts, founded the Chaloner Art Prize, also called the Paris Prize Fund, with White, Charles F. McKim, and William Waldorf Astor.²⁴ Over time, then, Chaloner and White became best friends. White even designed the buildings for and invested in Chaloner and Winthrop Chanler's Roanoke Rapids Power Company. Increasingly tied to the entire Chanler family, White and would play a part in Chaloner's commitment to Bloomingdale.

When Chaloner returned to the United States in 1887 from his European sojourn to enjoy the summer social season in Newport, Rhode Island, he met his future wife, the native Virginian and up-and-coming novelist Amélie Rives. Amélie, inspired by Chaloner, modeled the main

²² For more about young white male manliness, see: Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. For more information about the European tour, see: Levenstein, Harvey. *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

²³ Paul R. Baker. *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White*. New York: The Free Press, 1989, 255.

²⁴ Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White*, 255-7. For more on Stanford White and his relationships with Augustus St. Gaudens and Charles F. McKim, see Charles C. Baldwin, *Stanford White*, (1931) and the whole of Paul R. Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White*, (1989). For more on William Waldorf Astor and the Astor Family, see Lucy Kavalier's *The Astors: An American Legend* (1968).

character in her provocative new novel, *The Quick or the Dead?*, after him. The novel was quite scandalous for the period; the story follows a young widow who pursues an inappropriate relationship—the prose not lacking in sexual undertones—with her deceased husband’s cousin.²⁵ The Chanler family did not approve, and, after the two became engaged in the spring of 1888, insisted that Chaloner and Amélie not wed.²⁶ John Armstrong and Amélie married anyway, not long after their engagement, on June 14, 1888 in Albemarle County, Virginia.²⁷

Chaloner’s brothers and sisters were furious they were unable to attend the impromptu wedding.²⁸ Winthrop, never afraid to insult his brother, added a postscript to a letter written soon after the marriage: “The weather here is very warm, 93° in the shade today—I wonder if you wouldn’t find it cool in spite of the thermometer.”²⁹ Asked to apologize, Winthrop refused, so Chaloner took his family members out of his will and instead divided most of his estate between the University of Virginia and an orphanage in New York.³⁰

SIGNS OF INSANITY: DIVORCE & X-FACULTY

Chaloner and Amélie’s relationship was an emotional and tumultuous one from the start: the two shared nervous tendencies and had melodramatic, mercurial personalities.³¹ Unsurprisingly, then, the traditional “honeymoon period” did not last long for the newlyweds.

²⁵ Bryan, “Johnny Jackanapes,” 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5. Chaloner’s sister Margaret was the only one of his family that attended John Armstrong and Amélie’s wedding, predominantly because she was already visiting the couple at Amélie’s family estate, Castle Hill.

²⁹ Winthrop Chanler to John Armstrong Chanler, June 2, 1888, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

³⁰ Bryan. “Johnny Jackanapes,” 5.

³¹ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 117.

Some of Chaloner's family believed he spent much of his honeymoon in Europe writing "insane" letters home, while Amélie wrote melancholic and hysteric missives to Chaloner's sister Margaret insinuating that Chaloner was insane.³² By the time the newlyweds returned to the United States, their incompatibility led the couple to separate briefly. Amélie continued to gain fame through her social connections, which included writers such as Oscar Wilde, as well as the through the growing attention her books garnered her. Chaloner resented her growing fame, and magnified their differences, which too often strengthened each other's mental disturbances.³³ Amélie had frequent mood swings and began to sleepwalk in her white nightgown, leading some neighbors to mistake her for a ghost.³⁴ At this point, it was clear that Amélie was a danger to herself, so she and Chaloner sought out treatment for her.

After a consultation with her doctors, Amélie was taken to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell's Clinic for Nervous Diseases in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was placed under the care of Dr. J. Madison Taylor, the chief of clinic.³⁵ When her condition improved, she was released, and she and Chaloner continued their married life together at Castle Hill. His weekly trips up to Philadelphia to visit Amélie at Mitchell's clinic brought him into close contact with Taylor.³⁶ Chaloner and Taylor thus began a friendship, or at the very least a close personal familiarity, that would later become an integral part of Chaloner's battles for his legal sanity.

Over time, Chaloner and Amélie's relationship continued to deteriorate, and Amélie asked repeatedly for a divorce. After her publication of another controversial novel, Chaloner finally yielded to her request and the two obtained a divorce in September 1895 under the lenient

³² Carole Haber, "Who's Looney Now? The Insanity Case of John Armstrong Chaloner," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 60 (Summer 1986), 178, and Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 89.

³³ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 5 and Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 117.

³⁴ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 5.

³⁵ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

divorce laws of South Dakota.³⁷ The divorce over, Chaloner and Amélie became surprisingly good friends, and their friendship continued even after Amélie remarried to a Russian artist, Prince Pierre Troubetzkoy. Chaloner purchased his own Virginian estate in Albemarle not far from Amélie's Castle Hill. He called it "The Merry Mills."³⁸

In order to prove that he was not pining after his famous and beautiful ex-wife, Chaloner asserted that he, through will power and thought, had changed the color of his eyes from brown to gray, so that nothing, not even "autumn pools in sunlight,"—a direct quotation from Amélie's novel *The Quick or the Dead?*—would cause him to get caught up in mawkish contemplation of his past with Amélie.³⁹ Whatever his purpose in changing his eye color that does not change the fact that there was no medical or scientific way to do it. It could only be done through supernatural means, or, as Chaloner understood it, by mental power guided by his subconscious, his "X-Faculty."

This first major experience with his X-Faculty came in December 1895, only three months after his divorce from Amélie, a major turning point in Chaloner's life. In this initial encounter, according to Chaloner, "I was playing Billiards when I noticed that the balls broke in a strange manner, suggesting a map of the heavens. I broke them again and then a third time, and in each instance, in a similar manner, they formed circles and curves."⁴⁰ Thus began Chaloner's experimentation with his X-Faculty, which, over the months leading up to March 1897, would become progressively more unusual in the eyes of his friends and family members.

³⁷ Paul L. Chestnut, "Chaloner, John Armstrong." *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, edited by William S. Powell, University of North Carolina Press, (1979).

³⁸ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 5.

³⁹ Amélie Rives. *The Quick or the Dead? A Study*. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1888, 446 and Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 5.

⁴⁰ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 6.

Chaloner noticed that he received coherent messages from his X-Faculty using a planchette. As a devout Episcopalian and skeptic of Spiritualism, Chaloner did not look to supernatural explanations for what was happening, rejecting the idea that spirits were trying to communicate with him from beyond the grave. Instead, he sought a more “scientific” theory. The student of philosophy and psychology decided he was dealing with a mental faculty unknown to science; to emphasize the scientific, undiscovered nature of this mysterious faculty, he gave it the name X-Faculty, using “x” because of its use in algebra to denote an unknown value.⁴¹ Psychologists of this period were very interested in unconscious mental states, and conducted experiments on trance states, automatic writing, and hypnotism.

Intellectually fascinated by this enigmatic faculty, Chaloner pursued further investigations at The Merry Mills. Not only was he able to change his own eye color using this strange X-Faculty, but claimed that he also won \$600 off of a tip from it, and was directed by it to go into a trance-like state in which his facial features would appear to be exact copies of those of Napoleon Bonaparte’s death mask.⁴² After suffering burns on his hands from his experiment with hot coals, Chaloner’s family and friends became worried about what they saw as irrational behavior, and ultimately, came to question his sanity.⁴³

THE ROAD TO COMMITMENT

The Chanler family’s concern for their brother’s sanity increased in early 1897 as rumors of his psychological experiments and increasing reclusiveness reached New York from The

⁴¹ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 204.

⁴² Bryan, “Johnny Jackanapes,” 5-6.

⁴³ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 205.

Merry Mills.⁴⁴ Chaloner enjoyed the quieter country lifestyle there, as compared with his earlier days spent frequenting the New York social clubs. Concerned by changed personal habits and antipathy to receiving company on his estate, Chaloner's family had also grown alarmed by what they saw as his strange eating habits. For instance, he had adopted a semi-vegetarian diet and instituted a "system of dieting" in 1893 after he settled at The Merry Mills.⁴⁵ In 1897, Chaloner neither drank nor smoked, and reportedly ate only one meal every twenty-four hours consisting of dry bread with salt on it, sometimes with a bit of cheese, and then ice cream or candy for dessert.⁴⁶ And the fact that Chaloner was also living so close to his divorced wife, whom his family and friends believed had caused his erratic mood swings and nervous tendencies to escalate, also contributed to his family's and friends' concern. In 1897, Stanford White, at the urging of the Chanler family, decided to visit Chaloner at The Merry Mills to investigate his mental and physical condition. White arrived at The Merry Mills with another man in tow, a psychiatrist masquerading as an oculist, Dr. Eugene Fuller, without a formal invitation and despite Chaloner's protestations.⁴⁷ After he calmed down from the shock of unexpected visitors, White convinced him to take a break from his hermitlike existence and "plunge into the metropolitan whirl" for a few days by traveling up to New York with the two men.⁴⁸

This trip to New York would change his life forever, transforming his public persona from an eccentric millionaire to an insane paranoiac in need of permanent institutionalization. Accompanied by White and Fuller, Chaloner checked into the Kensington Hotel on lower Fifth

⁴⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁵ "'I Am the Reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte' Says Amélie Rives' Divorced Husband," *The Washington Times Magazine*, November 04, 1906, 5.

⁴⁶ "'I Am the Reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte,'" *The Washington Times Magazine*, 5.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 205.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 205.

Avenue in New York City, a place he frequently stayed when in New York on business.⁴⁹ Not long after Chaloner settled into his room, Fuller arrived with a consultant and two men who were instructed to wait outside.⁵⁰ When the men entered the room, the consultant revealed himself as Dr. Moses Allen Starr, Professor of Nervous Diseases at Columbia.⁵¹ The men informed Chaloner that they were there to commit him to an insane asylum because of his erratic behavior and strange psychological experiments. Chaloner immediately drew a pistol from under his pillow and had no trouble convincing the men that he was not leaving his hotel room with them that night.⁵²

The next day, Chaloner and White's mutual friend Augustus Saint-Gaudens visited Chaloner's hotel room so that the two could talk about his experiments. Without warning, Chaloner realized that a prophesy of his X-Faculty—that he would go into a trance during which his features would change to resemble the death mask of Napoleon Bonaparte—was at that moment becoming a reality.⁵³ At the very moment Chaloner entered his trance state, Dr. Starr and two of his officers arrived with a warrant for his involuntary commitment in an asylum, signed by his brothers Lewis and Winthrop and his cousin, Arthur Carey of Boston. It asserted that Chaloner had a tendency toward hallucinations and was incapable of managing himself or his finances.⁵⁴ Perhaps emotionally overwhelmed or stunned, Chaloner did not fight back, and

⁴⁹ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² John Armstrong Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law Or The Battle of the Millionaires A Play in Three Acts and Three Scenes Time, 1887: Treating the Adventures of the Author of "Who's Looney Now?"* Roanoke Rapids, NC: Palmetto Press, 1914, 69 and Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 7.

⁵³ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 7.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7 and Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 197.

allowed Starr and his officers to commit him to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum in White Plains, New York, on March 13, 1987.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 7.

CHAPTER 2:

CHALONER'S CASE—OPINIONS OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHIATRISTS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS, 1897—1911

“Place yourself above suspicion of being other than permissibly peculiar, or individual, or original.”

—Dr. J. Madison Taylor to John Armstrong Chaloner, August 18, 1902

Chaloner was a prominent public figure, primarily because he was an eccentric millionaire and, in his younger days, very active in New York's Knickerbocker social clubs and frequently seen out with his friend Stanford White.⁵⁶ Thus his disappearance from the newspaper headlines, beginning during his period as a recluse at The Merry Mills and compounded by his institutionalization at Bloomingdale, did not go unnoticed by the public. Initially, Chaloner's siblings, wanting to keep the family name in good regard, spread word that he was merely on a European vacation. The public did not believe this story, however, and rumors ran rampant until his law partner Harry Van Ness Philip issued a statement to the press confirming Chaloner's residence at Bloomingdale Asylum. Philip initially explained that Chaloner needed “a good rest.” Later, at the insistence of gossipers, Philip lengthened his statement, amending it to “Mr. Chanler's commitment grew out of his necessary seclusion of himself for a long period of time, in the study of experimental psychology.”⁵⁷

Bloomingdale would have been regarded as a natural choice for Chaloner's family, as the asylum was known for being a haven for wealthy patients. As early as 1843, Bloomingdale's superintendent stated that the asylum sought to serve “the wealthy” and “indigent persons of superior respectability and personal refinement.”⁵⁸ A private hospital founded by the New York

⁵⁶ Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White*, 255.

⁵⁷ Bryan, “Johnny Jackanapes,” 7-8.

⁵⁸ Gerald N. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill*, New York: Free Press, 1994, 37.

Hospital, it changed its name to Society of the New York Hospital, Bloomingdale, White Plains, before Chaloner was committed. While the asylum movement in the United States began in the early 1800s with the policy of placing those with mental disease in a specifically designated hospital, by the 1870s, mental hospitals and asylums had generally taken the form that they would keep until the turn the twentieth century when Chaloner would become a patient at Bloomingdale.

Confusion about Chaloner's mental state and ability to manage his own estate was not, however, limited to the press' coverage. His absence meant that his business relationships with his other family members, including shared interest and income from properties held in trust, became increasingly muddled.⁵⁹ The Chanler family's lawyer, Henry Lewis Morris, pressed Chaloner's brothers and sisters for decisions about what to do with his finances and his rights while in Bloomingdale as the months passed by and no judicial ruling had yet declared Chanler incompetent.⁶⁰ Eventually, Lewis and Winthrop decided that Chaloner should not have access to his estate, and without the support of Stanford White, who still held Chaloner's power of attorney, moved to have Chaloner declared legally insane by a sheriff's jury.⁶¹

Because lunacy proceedings were usually begun by members of a patient's immediate family, it is not surprising that Chaloner's brothers played such a large part in his commitment and the legal proceedings concerning his sanity.⁶² It was common during the late nineteenth century for families, especially wealthy ones, dealing with a relative's extreme behavior to begin the process of institutionalization to secure the family's public image and resolve internal family

⁵⁹ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 274.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶² Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Illness, Mental Illness and American Society, 1875-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, 9.

crises.⁶³ While committing an individual to an asylum was a complex legal process that attempted to protect both the individual from wrongful commitment and the family and the public from potential harm, it was, also generally informal, relying on human decisions rather than on laws.⁶⁴ As Chaloner soon came to realize, his family's ability to commit him to Bloomingdale was linked directly to the laws and common practices governing commitment of insane persons to asylums.

When Chaloner's sanity hearing convened in 1899, he was noticeably absent from the room. Suffering from a serious back injury, he was physically unable to attend his hearing to defend his sanity against the assertions of Bloomingdale's psychiatrists. Consequently, the three medical witnesses that testified at this jury, Superintendent of Bloomingdale Dr. Samuel P. Lyon, Dr. Carlos F. MacDonald, and Dr. Austin Flint, were able to present an unopposed portrait of Chaloner as "a seriously deranged man."⁶⁵ For instance, Flint asserted that Chaloner "had the delusion of the change of personality which is observed in many cases of 'paranoia,'" and that Chaloner had "a typical case of what is known as paranoia or chronic delusional insanity [which] is incurable and progressive and will finally terminate in dementia."⁶⁶ As evidence for his diagnosis, Flint pointed to Chaloner's Napoleonic trance that he had first exhibited in the Kensington Hotel, declaring that Chaloner had "some fixed delusion like this delusion that he is Napoleon Bonaparte."⁶⁷ Ultimately, Flint testified that he was not "capable of taking care of his

⁶³ Grob, *Mental Illness*, 9.

⁶⁴ Grob, *Mad Among Us*, 80.

⁶⁵ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 275 and Haber, "Who's Looney Now?" 181.

⁶⁶ John Armstrong Chaloner, *In the Supreme Court of the United States, October Term, 1916, No. 121 John Armstrong Chaloner, Plaintiff-in-Error, against Thomas T. Sherman, Defendant-in-Error, Brief of Plaintiff-In-Error*. Washington: National Publishing Co., 1916, 280-1.

⁶⁷ Chaloner, *Brief of Plaintiff-in-Error*, 281.

estate and person,” and that Chaloner characterized “an absolutely typical case [of paranoia] from every point of view.”⁶⁸ Flint’s testimony offered no doubts or qualifications.

MacDonald echoed and built upon Flint’s testimony; he used the same term—“typical”—to describe Chaloner’s presentation of symptoms, and even went so far as to characterize the case as “textbook.” MacDonald too argued without hesitation that Chaloner was suffering from paranoia. He testified that:

The form of [Chaloner’s] insanity, from which he is suffering, is ‘paranoia’ or chronic delusional insanity, the English term of it. It is an incurable form of mental disease [...] characterized in the mania known in the later stage by the change in the personality of the individual. I should say that Mr. Chanler is the most typical classical case of ‘paranoia’ I have ever seen. I have seen thousands of them. It presents all the essential and diagnostic signs of that disease [...] In the physical and mental condition there is no symptom lacking to make it a perfectly typical case of paranoia. If one wanted a case for teaching or describing a case in a textbook you could not describe it more graphically than simply taking his case as it presents itself. *It is the most striking case of paranoia that I have ever seen in my life.*⁶⁹

Thus, from their initial visit to Chaloner at the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane on March 16, 1898, MacDonald and Flint declared unequivocally that Chaloner was a paranoiac and testified that he required permanent institutionalization in an asylum for his condition, as they expected Chaloner’s paranoid delusions to increase in number and strength over time.⁷⁰

For the sheriff’s jury, the doctors’ testimony was enough to find Chaloner insane—one who was suffering from “paranoia,” or “systematic delusional insanity,” which called for permanent, lifelong institutionalization at Bloomingdale Asylum.⁷¹ Because of this decision and its subsequent approval by the Supreme Court of New York, Chaloner was, in his mind,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 281.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 281.

⁷¹ Haber, “Who’s Looney Now?” 181.

sentenced to life “behind the bars of Bloomingdale.” But he had no intention of staying, and began planning his escape.

ROBBERY UNDER THE LAW: CRITIQUING ASYLUMS

Many patients in mental hospitals at the turn of the century found confinement in the asylum to be a traumatic experience since they were removed from their homes, stripped of their personal liberty, and were forced to live in proximity to violent or bizarre inmates; Chaloner was no exception.⁷² Throughout his time in Bloomingdale, he developed very negative, and even hostile, views towards the institution, its superintendent, and its medical staff. Years later, in 1915, Chaloner would publish *Robbery Under the Law*, a fictionalized account of his experience at Bloomingdale, making the novel’s protagonist, Stutfield, his literary alter ego.⁷³ Stutfield’s “cell” in *Robbery Under the Law*, presumably modeled on Chaloner’s, is described as “a dark, gloomy, small room with heavily-barred, small windows,” with “three doors to the cell; one leading to his keeper’s adjoining cell, and one to the bath-room, and one to the hall.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Stutfield describes his mental state in Bloomingdale and how he keeps himself sane; his favorite activity was reading newspapers, since “amusement is enlivening and restful for the human mind in the extraordinary situation in which I find myself, looked upon, and treated and spoken of to my face, as being a hopelessly, insane dangerous maniac!”⁷⁵

⁷² Grob, *Mad Among Us*, 83.

⁷³ In *Robbery Under the Law*’s prologue, Chaloner asserts that the information and events from Act III Scene one are “almost verbatim and almost from life” while Act III Scene two “is practically so” on page iii. Therefore, it can be presumed that Stutfield’s cell and mental state cited in the next two footnotes are representative of what Chaloner’s were in reality.

⁷⁴ Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

Chaloner's insistence that he was a sane man trapped in an asylum because of a family conspiracy and misdiagnosis was not an uncommon claim at the turn of the century. While there are documented instances of certified wrongful commitment of sane persons to asylums, it was relatively rare for this to occur.⁷⁶ But discussions about the nature of insanity and unease about institutionalization proliferated in newspapers across the country. A significant number of Americans expressed their worry about the possibility of being unjustly institutionalized, so much so that prominent psychiatrists noted the public's influence on the creation or reform of new lunacy laws. In 1883, the New York state legislature responded to the public's agitation against what were regarded as improper commitments by passing legislation regulating procedures for commitment and detention of the insane. Psychiatrists reacted with alarm that public sensationalism unnecessarily curbed proper treatment and fought back against the public images and regulations over the next two decades. In a 1896 essay for the *American Journal of Insanity*, none other than Bloomingdale psychiatrist Carlos MacDonald cited the American public as the primary reason for what he deemed a misguided new law. The change, he declared, "doubtless owes its origin to the popular delusion that commitments of sane persons to institutions for the insane are of frequent occurrence."⁷⁷ Hoping to shape public opinion directly, MacDonald penned a column in the *Omaha Daily Bee* under the headline "Are We All Crazy?" After the journalist in charge of the story proposed the rhetorical questions "How is sanity or the reverse determined? Is dementia becoming epidemic in this city and country?," MacDonald assured his readers that "every individual has his own standard of sanity, and it is only when he differs from himself, departs from his normal mental state, or is in a state of mental alibi, that he

⁷⁶ Grob, *Mad Among Us*, 81.

⁷⁷ Carlos F. MacDonald, "State Care and State Maintenance for the Dependent Insane in the State of New York," *The American Journal of Insanity* 53 (1896), 87.

may be adjudged Insane.”⁷⁸ This statement is indicative of the change in psychiatrists’ understanding of the nature of insanity and its focus on a more individualized notion of insanity that judges the mental state of a person as normal or abnormal based on that person’s own “normal.”

Other psychiatrists echoed McDonald. John B. Chapin, a psychiatrist who worked in both New York and Philadelphia, discussed popular worry and the new lunacy law in the *American Journal of Insanity* in 1896. He observed that “a community may be shocked, and a curious, even morbid, interest aroused at the suggestion of the possibility that a citizen may be improperly and illegally deprived of his liberty.”⁷⁹ In the same vein, a psychiatrist from Danvers State Hospital, W. L. Worchester, bemoaned how often doctors’ diagnoses of insanity were questioned. “It has probably happened to every physician engaged in the treatment of the insane to have the insanity of some of his patients called into question, and when he mentioned delusions, hallucinations, and perverted conduct, to be met with the reply: ‘Oh, I know his mind isn’t right, but I don’t think he is crazy.’”⁸⁰ Such statements highlight how the American public’s understanding of insanity differed greatly from that of professional psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century. What made a person’s family member, neighbor, or co-worker merely “eccentric” or “permissibly peculiar,” as Taylor stated, rather than a crazy lunatic?⁸¹ A lack of understanding and of clear diagnostic categories in this period continued to foster distrust between the American public and professional psychiatrists.

⁷⁸ Carlos F. MacDonald, “Are We All Crazy?” *Omaha Daily Bee*, September 16, 1906, 34.

⁷⁹ John B. Chapin, “On the Detention of the Insane, and the Writ of Habeas Corpus.” *The American Journal of Insanity* 53 (1896), 242, 245.

⁸⁰ W. L. Worchester, “What is Insanity?” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (1896), 602.

⁸¹ Dr. J. Madison Taylor to John Armstrong Chaloner, August 18, 1902, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

The decades following the establishment of asylums in the United States in the early 1800s saw growing discontent with the treatment of the insane, including debates that began in the 1860s centered on legal commitment proceedings that could forcibly detain individuals found insane and strip them of their constitutional liberties. The newspapers from across the United States displayed the public's worry about sane persons being unfairly committed to asylums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. growing number of insane patients in the U.S. had sparked a discussion about the nature of insanity as a disease. Between 1890 and 1910, the number of individuals labeled as insane and hospitalized grew by 154 percent, while the American population only grew by 46 percent.⁸² The general public worried over the question of illegitimate institutionalization while at the same time wondered whether the conditions of modern life encouraged insanity. Such fears could be gleaned in the headlines of newspapers and magazines. For example, in 1912, *The Times-Dispatch* of Richmond, Virginia, ran an article called "Are We Growing Crazier? Number of Lunatics Increasing."⁸³

Bloomington Insane Asylum was a particular target for criticism. Years before Chaloner published his fictionalized account of Bloomington in 1915, the asylum had already been placed under a critical microscope. In 1898, the *Wichita Daily Eagle*, for example, ran a story about a patient at Bloomington Insane Asylum under the headline, "Is She Crazy Or No? Beautiful Mrs. Wilmerding Says She is Not But Will Become So If She Must Stay in Bloomington Much Longer."⁸⁴ Mrs. Wilmerding, formerly Miss Marie Vanderbilt Allen, was a great-granddaughter of the famous Commodore Vanderbilt and a member of New York's social elite. Thousands of

⁸² E. Fuller Torrey and Judy Miller. *The Invisible Plague: The Rise of Mental Illness from 1750 to the Present*. Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001, 7.

⁸³ John Elfresth Watkins, "Are We Growing Crazier? Number of Lunatics Increasing," *The Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA). October 20, 1912, 32.

⁸⁴ "Is She Crazy or No? Beautiful Mrs. Wilmerding Says She Is Not But Will Become So If She Must Stay in Bloomington Much Longer," *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, August 30, 1898, 6.

miles from New York, the Kansas newspaper recounted how Wilmerding's wealthy relatives placed her in Bloomingdale, while a number of her influential friends, believing her sane, sought to help her gain her freedom. The paper indicated that this was not a unique situation: The story began, "From time to time numerous books have been published illustrative of the horrors suffered by a sane person in a mad-house."⁸⁵

Clearly the paper's sympathies were with Wilmerding for her "woeful experience in the Bloomingdale insane asylum," finding it "pitiful enough [that] a board of experts declared the unfortunate woman insane."⁸⁶ Like Chaloner, Wilmerding described her experience at Bloomingdale as hellish, and the author of the article opined that her experience was "terrible to contemplate, very terrible, if the woman is really sane as she avers" and that "there can hardly be a more wretched fate than" hers.⁸⁷ It is perhaps no coincidence that two of the experts that played a part in declaring Wilmerding insane were Carlos MacDonald and Austin Flint.⁸⁸ Flint, who had reportedly examined Wilmerding twice but in the view of the paper, "not very carefully," was quoted as saying that to release Wilmerding from Bloomingdale would be "the culmination of all the calamities."⁸⁹ At the very least, Wilmerding's story shows that Chaloner's accusations and criticisms against Bloomingdale and its psychiatrists were not the only ones that the American public could have read about in the press.

On August 10, 1902, the *St. Paul Globe* ran a half-page article, "Is Insanity Contagious?," by Dr. W. B. Fletcher focused on Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. According to Fletcher, "the institution had been undergoing the fire of severe criticism at the hands of one of

⁸⁵ "Is She Crazy or No?," 6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

the New York leading dailies,” which began when a newspaper reporter had himself committed to Bloomingdale as an “insane patient” and subsequently published an exposé about his struggle against the superintendent to get released as a sane man. It reportedly caused the superintendant to resign and have a mental breakdown.⁹⁰

FLEEING TO PHILADELPHIA: SILAS WEIR MITCHELL’S CLINIC & PSYCHOLOGISTS

Over the several months following his trial, Chaloner complied with the psychiatric counseling and daily regime his doctors at Bloomingdale prescribed and was rewarded by relaxed restrictions and surveillance. Although his doctors continued to diagnose him as an incurable paranoiac who was prone to delusions and hallucinations, they allowed him to take longer and longer walks around the grounds of the asylum.⁹¹ Over time, while continuing to plan his escape from Bloomingdale, Chaloner learned to walk twelve miles in three hours, which allowed him to learn the schedules of the trains at the nearest town.⁹² He finally got the opportunity he was looking for on Thanksgiving eve of 1900. He managed to secure ten dollars, walk to the train station, and board a train to Philadelphia.

The press, as well as Chaloner’s family, quickly learned that the famous Astor heir had vanished from the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum.⁹³ It was clear to the Bloomingdale authorities,

⁹⁰ The reporter mentioned in this story is almost definitively Julius Chambers, who undertook an undercover investigation of Bloomingdale in 1872 and published his story in the *New York Tribune*. His investigations into Bloomingdale led him to publish a book. For his book in its entirety, see: Chambers, Julius, *A Mad World and Its Inhabitants*, London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1876.

⁹¹ Bryan, “Johnny Jackanapes,” 8.

⁹² “‘I Am the Reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte’ Says Amélie Rives’ Divorced Husband,” *The Washington Times Magazine*, 5.

⁹³ The newspapers *The Times* (Richmond, VA), *The Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), *The Times* (Washington, D.C.), and *The San Francisco Call*, among others, ran stories about Chaloner’s disappearance from Bloomingdale beginning in November and December of 1900.

and especially to Superintendent Lyon, that Chaloner had made a voluntary and carefully planned escape. Chaloner, in a snide act of defiance, left behind a note for Lyon in his room.⁹⁴ The note reportedly read: “My dear Doctor: You have always said that I am insane. You have always said that I believe that I am the reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte. As a learned and sincere man, you, therefore, will not be surprised that I take French leave. Yours, with regret that we must part, J. A. Chanler.”⁹⁵

Newspapers reported on Chaloner’s disappearance from Bloomingdale, creating a whirlwind of rumors, including one that he had died after his escape, perhaps by drowning. On September 22, 1901, *The Times* of Richmond, Virginia, reported that “All sorts of hypotheses were indulged in as to his whereabouts, but nothing at all definite turning up, the public interest finally quieted down, the general belief being that he had lost his life by drowning in his efforts to escape.”⁹⁶ In fact, Chaloner was alive and well, having made it to the private clinic of Silas Weir Mitchell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where no one had thought to look for him.⁹⁷ Dr. Mitchell was appointed as physician to the Orthopaedic Hospital and Infirmary for Nervous Diseases in Philadelphia in 1872, and was subsequently made visiting physician to the Insane Department of the Philadelphia Hospital.⁹⁸ Besides these medical appointments, Mitchell had also written about 150 papers and become well known in the medical and scientific communities for his work in using hypodermic injections to treat what he termed “causalgia,” the terrible

⁹⁴ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 287.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁹⁶ “Chanler Case Stirs Albemarle: Common Topic of Conversation in Charlottesville,” *The Times* (Richmond, VA), September 22, 1901, 5.

⁹⁷ Thomas, *A Pride of Lions*, 287.

⁹⁸ Beverly Tucker, *Silas Weir Mitchell: A Brief Sketch of His Life with Personal Recollections*, Boston: R. G. Badger (1914), 14-15.

burning pain that followed injuries to nerves.⁹⁹ In 1894, Mitchell had already become famous for his work with nervous diseases and was so well-respected that the American Medico-Psychological Association invited him to address the organization in celebration of its fiftieth birthday; however, Mitchell was not afraid to criticize the current state of psychiatry, which he thought needed improvement and remained too isolated from medicine.¹⁰⁰ Chaloner was likely aware of Dr. Mitchell's prominence in the medical community and made a calculated choice to go into Mitchell's clinic to have a respected authority on lunacy certify his sanity.

Upon arrival at Mitchell's private clinic, Chaloner took on an alias, John Childe, and pretended to be a lawyer for a client who wished to establish his sanity. After meeting with Mitchell's chief of staff at the clinic, Dr. J. Madison Taylor, and successfully convincing him to take his client under his care, Chaloner revealed his true identity to Taylor. Chaloner then voluntarily checked himself in to the private clinic with the intention of establishing his sanity. The choice of Taylor as his doctor was most likely an easy one for Chaloner, just as his choice to go to Silas Weir Mitchell's clinic was. Taylor was the personal physician to James G. Blaine, Theodore Roosevelt, and Joseph Pulitzer, and had also treated Chaloner's ex-wife Amélie years earlier.¹⁰¹ Over the years, the two men had built a friendship primarily through letter writing.¹⁰²

John Madison Taylor earned his A.M. from Princeton in 1876 and his M.D. from the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania in 1878. According to his Memorial by Guy Hinsdale, M.D., "the most important influence on his professional career was his service in

⁹⁹ Tucker, *Silas Weir Mitchell*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Grob, *Mental Illness*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Haber, "Who's Looney Now?" 183, and Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 9.

¹⁰² Scholars have questioned why Taylor did not recognize Chaloner when Chaloner appeared at the clinic since the two men had met more than once before. The answer to this question has not yet been discovered in the available source materials, but the fact remains that Taylor was a well-respected doctor at one of the most famous clinics for nervous diseases in America at the turn of the twentieth century.

the clinic of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell at the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases” where he “assisted Dr. Mitchell in a great deal of his private hospital practice,” and cared for Chaloner. Hinsdale also asserted, “through Dr. Mitchell [Dr. Taylor] came in contact with many distinguished people whose recovery of health was no doubt hastened by the enthusiastic cooperation of the young assistant whose sympathy and tact inevitably won him friends.”¹⁰³ One of these “distinguished people” Hinsdale was referring to may have been Chaloner, since Chaloner was a popular public figure and Taylor was an essential part of Chaloner’s defense in cases concerning his sanity.

Chaloner’s choice of clinic would prove to be apt, not only because of the relationship he formed with Taylor, but also because he met or corresponded with some of the leading neurologists and psychologists of the day, including William James, the author of *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and an advocate of psychological research into claims of mediumship and telepathy; Joseph Jastrow, a prominent professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin; Dr. Horatio Curtis Wood; and Thomson Jay Hudson. Dr. Wood received his M. D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1862, became Clinical Professor of Diseases of the Nervous System there in 1875, and was appointed as a Professor of Therapeutics at the University of Pennsylvania in 1876. Throughout his career, Wood published many scientific treatises about the brain and the diagnosis of nervous diseases, among other subjects.¹⁰⁴ Professor Thomson Jay Hudson was a psychological author and lecturer. He was most famous for his book *The Law of Psychic Phenomena*, which detailed his theories about the human mind and the legitimacy of experimental psychology as a scientific field of study.

¹⁰³ Guy Hinsdale. “Memorial: John Madison Taylor, A.M., M.D.” *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association* 48 (1932): xli.

¹⁰⁴ Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 148, reprinted from *Who’s Who in America*.

Each of these psychologists, with the exception of the psychiatrist Wood, testified to Chaloner's sanity from his own unique perspective, and would highlight the conflict between and among American psychologists and psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century. Although the term "profession" traditionally only applied to careers in law, religion, and medicine, both psychiatrists and psychologists at the end of the nineteenth century sought to professionalize their fields through the creation of new organizations that governed the admission and conduct of members and created standardized "scientific" practices for the discipline.¹⁰⁵ Between the 1890s and 1920s, psychiatrists in America, influenced by social, cultural, and scientific currents of thought, sought to revise and reorient their focus away from asylums and toward the definition of mental disease and treatment.¹⁰⁶

For six months, Chaloner stayed under Taylor's care in Mitchell's private clinic, remaining concealed from his family, friends, and the press while discussing his case with these experts. At the end of these six months, the agreement among Chaloner's doctors and psychologists in Philadelphia was unanimous—he was a sane man.¹⁰⁷ From these men, Chaloner received several expert medical and psychological opinions in support of his sanity, which would form the backbone of his case against MacDonald and Flint's confident diagnosis of him as an incurable and insane paranoiac in need of permanent institutionalization.

PSYCHIATRISTS, PSYCHOLOGISTS, AND CONFLICTING DIAGNOSES

One answer to this question is found in the disagreement during the period about what the medical definition of insanity was. Unfortunately for Chaloner, his commitment to

¹⁰⁵ Grob, *Mental Illness*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes," 9.

Bloomington occurred during a period when medical conceptions of “insanity” were in flux. In the early to late nineteenth century, “insanity” was used primarily to define a person as “abnormal” and as subject to the control of psychiatrists, and therefore, to confinement in an asylum.¹⁰⁸ But, diagnosis was highly imprecise since there were no uniform diagnostic categories and symptoms, and psychiatrists sought to affirm their power over insane patients by controlling psychological examinations and, essentially, creating their own definitions for insanity.¹⁰⁹ However, psychiatrists at the turn of the twentieth century recognized that their profession needed to establish standards and conduct thorough research on the etiology and nature of insanity in order to gain back credibility not only in the scientific and medical communities, but also with the public.¹¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, the generally accepted psychiatric categories of insanity were simple, including broad categories such as mania, monomania, melancholia, dementia, and idiocy, but as the twentieth century dawned, psychiatrists began to see insanity less as a binary (insane or sane) but as a person’s degree of variation from the “normal.”¹¹¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, because there existed differing opinions of what constituted insanity in an individual, there were numerous conflicting definitions of diagnostic terms such as “paranoia,”—the disease from which MacDonald and Flint asserted Chaloner suffered. James took issue with MacDonald and Flint’s understanding of paranoia and the nature Chaloner’s trance writing. In defense of Chaloner, James wrote, “in delusional insanity there is also automatism, so “Paranoia” so-called, and mediumship have elements in common. But for Paranoia to be diagnosed there must be no distinct alternation between the primary and the “X”

¹⁰⁸ Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹⁰ Grob, *Mad Among Us*, 57.

¹¹¹ Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion*, 306.

consciousness, and there must be marked abnormal peculiarities in the case as well as intellectual delusion.”¹¹² Therefore, James argued that the Napoleon trances which MacDonald and Flint cited as definitive symptoms of Chaloner’s paranoid delusions were in fact evidence instead for a separate conscious mental state, which meant that Chaloner was not delusional since the behavior under inspection occurred in a distinct alternate mental state.

Another prominent conflict of opinion between psychologists and psychiatrists in general, involved the legitimacy of experimental psychology as a field of scientific research and inquiry. Throughout the 1880s, there were many scientific and popular discussions about Spiritualism, animal magnetism, and trance states, but the main supporters for scientific inquiry into these subjects were members of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), founded by William James, among others, in 1885.¹¹³ By the 1890s, studies in hypnotism had come to the forefront of psychical research as psychologists like James strove to understand the workings of the subconscious, which they assumed to be a typical part of the normal mind.¹¹⁴ James, Jastrow, and their fellow experimental psychologists felt that everyone has a subconscious mind that could reveal unusual cognitions whereas others, including these psychiatrists, felt that only the insane would exhibit certain “altered states” or “second consciousnesses.” Thus, a sharp contrast between the psychical researchers and their psychiatrist counterparts came into focus at the turn of the twentieth century, as the respected academics who pursued psychical research sought out “normal” persons reporting mystical or supernatural experiences, rather than certified lunatics and recovering hysterics in asylum or hospital beds.¹¹⁵

¹¹² James, “Statement,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 159.

¹¹³ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 207.

¹¹⁴ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 208.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

Particularly, members of the ASPR promoted the study of the unconscious and the trance or automatic states that they believed provided the best evidence for its existence. The ASPR experimented extensively with automatic writing, and Adolf Myers, one of the founders of the ASPR, argued that “automatic writing is but one among a whole series of kindred automatisms which have been intermittently noted, divergently interpreted, since history began.”¹¹⁶ Other psychologists, including James, sought to find common ground between science and religion, specifically through the study of trance states; however, the efforts of experimental psychologists were not as successful as they had hoped, since the researchers, primarily academic psychologists or philosophers, fought to establish psychology’s place as a scientific and academic discipline at a time when many other disciplines were also trying to establish their own place as modern and “scientific” professions.¹¹⁷

Thus, Chaloner’s explanation of his study about “graphic automatism,” and his interest in studying his own subconscious—his X-Faculty—was consistent with what well-known experimental psychologists were researching at the time. James, Jastrow, and Hudson were therefore willing to defend Chaloner’s sanity and psychological experiments in a courtroom. With these prominent and well-respected men testifying on his behalf, Chaloner felt that “I shall have the whole broad field of Psychology on my side, and as Professor Hudson is as anti-spiritualistic, anti-witchcraft, anti-supernatural, as is Jastrow they [...] will give each other the ‘glad hand’ on the common ground of the ‘naturalness’ of all mental phenomena.”¹¹⁸ In fact, all

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 256.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 249. For more information on James’ psychical research, particularly for the case of Mrs. Piper, his “white crow,” see William James, *Essays in Psychical Research*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

¹¹⁸ John Childe to Dr. J. Madison Taylor [draft], June 30, 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Note: John Childe is Chaloner’s alias.

three men did testify on behalf of Chaloner's sanity, and an analysis of what arguments they used in their testimony highlights their support not only of Chaloner, but, more importantly, of his experiments with his subconscious and his ability to perform feats of automatic writing. Each of the men saw Chaloner's display of "graphic automatism" to be a normal, although somewhat uncommon, mental phenomena that should be studied rather than classified as a symptom of insanity. Their defense of Chaloner's experiments in automatic writing reveals their continued support for and interest in experiments concerning consciousness, trance states, and hypnotism.

JASTROW, JAMES, AND HUDSON'S DEFENSE OF CHALONER

Professor Joseph Jastrow gave one of the most complete opinions of Chaloner, and believed that his automatic writing or "graphic automatism" was, when measured against the general population, not usual, but also "not to be regarded as a presumptive concomitant or indication of a mentally impaired or diseased condition."¹¹⁹ He further wrote:

I am accordingly of the opinion that the phenomena of automatic writing as exhibited by Mr. Chaloner are not only consistent with, but in the form exhibited by him, not prejudicial to a mental endowment and capacity falling within the range of individual variations, ordinarily included under the normal. I am of the opinion that this power is to be looked upon as a mental peculiarity, which like many other peculiarities, forms a part of the individual endowment [...] I see no reason for viewing [his trance states] in any other light than the automatic writing—that is as a phenomena indicative of a sensitive nervous organization finding their origin in the same obscure individual peculiarities [...] In brief, I find Mr. Chaloner's attitude towards the psychological phenomena of a somewhat unusual nature which he has observed in himself to be in its general outlines a thoughtful and plausible one, and in all respects, including those points which do not meet with my personal endorsement, I have no hesitation in pronouncing his opinions to fall well within the ordinary and normal range of diversity of opinion current in such topics. Nor do I find in his attitude towards his opinions any characteristics which could not readily be duplicated among a miscellaneous

¹¹⁹ Joseph Jastrow, "A Preliminary Opinion," in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 153.

group of normal, intelligent persons of training, education and attainment compatible to those which Mr. Chaloner enjoys.¹²⁰

Jastrow, then, had already adopted a different view of insanity than the general nineteenth-century understanding of it. He spoke to Chaloner's sanity in terms of "individual variations" included under what was considered to be "normal," meaning that having some form of mental peculiarity contributed to individual personality differences, and not necessarily to having some form of insanity. Assessing Chaloner's experiments with his X-Faculty, Jastrow declared with "no hesitation," that he thought Chaloner's opinions fell "well within the ordinary and normal range of diversity of opinion current in such topics." Ultimately, the fact that Jastrow, a famous psychologist and debunker of spiritualist mediums, disagreed with Chaloner's theories but judged that they were well within the norm of experimental psychology, must have given Chaloner's defense important credibility in the eyes of the judge and jurors.

William James also argued in favor of Chaloner's "intellectual soundness," which differed from Jastrow's in that it was based on James' advocacy of open-mindedness regarding who should participate in psychical and experimental research. But James' assessment of Chaloner supported Jastrow's in refuting the opinions of MacDonald and Flint. James wrote:

It seems to me a monstrous claim to say that a man may not make experiments, even as extreme as that, upon his own person without putting his legal freedom in jeopardy. The Napoleon experiment falls strictly within the limits of praiseworthy research. Psychology would be more advanced, were there more subjects of automatism ready to explore carefully their eccentric faculty. Although the medical profession is beginning to acquaint itself with these phenomena, it is still lamentably ignorant.¹²¹

James described Chaloner's experiments—including his "Napoleon experiment"—as "praiseworthy research," and called medical professionals in general "lamentably ignorant," but

¹²⁰ Jastrow, "A Preliminary Opinion," in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 155.

¹²¹ James, "Statement," in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 158-159.

went on to say that “Specialists in insanity,” such as MacDonald and Flint, “in particular [were] ignorant.”¹²² Surely, these special examiners in lunacy would not have appreciated James’ critical assessment of their professional positions.

James’ defense of Chaloner reveals his more general support for the open-minded attitude he believed scientists of all disciplines needed to have in order for scientific advancement to flourish. “Psychology,” he declared, “would be more advanced, were there more subjects of automatism ready to explore carefully their eccentric faculty.”¹²³ Here, one is led to believe that more people have these psychic automatisms, but are not “ready” to explore them because they are, perhaps, afraid to put their “legal freedom in jeopardy” by participating in experiments similar to Chaloner’s. Although psychical research was not considered to be mainstream scientific research, James was an authority on the topic; James’s endorsement of Chaloner’s experiments and sanity was therefore essential not only to Chaloner’s defense in court, but also to James’s larger defense of experimental psychology and psychical research as legitimate scientific disciplines within psychology.

Hudson’s support of Chaloner’s also reveal his disapproval of setting limitations on scientific study. He contended that Chaloner was simply misunderstood because he was ahead of the current state of science. Indeed, Chaloner’s “fundamental inductions” about experimental psychology were “on lines of scientifically demonstrable truth.”¹²⁴ Hudson, a self-professed student of “what is [...] known to science as Experimental Psychology,” explained that he had seen others go into a state of mental alienation due to psychological experiments gone awry, but he asserted that he did not observe anything consistent with insanity in Chaloner during his

¹²² Ibid., 158-159.

¹²³ Ibid., 158-159.

¹²⁴ Thomson Jay Hudson, “To Whom it May Concern,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 160.

several-hour interview with him in Philadelphia.¹²⁵ Hudson, in a similar fashion to James, commended Chaloner for his efforts to find new psychological truths:

Obviously he is not insane, nor is he in any danger of insanity, on the subject of the “X-Faculty;” and he is not held to be insane on any other subject. In conclusion I might truthfully remark that this is not the first time in the history of advancing civilization that men have been imprisoned for taking a step in advance of their age in scientific research [...] This is not a criminal prosecution, although it deprived Mr. Chaloner of his liberty just as effectually as if he had been charged with high crimes and misdemeanors [...] It would seem, therefore, that Chaloner’s imprisonment was due to the over-anxiety and caution of friends who were not in a position to appreciate or understand the real nature of his scientific investigations. Of his perfect sanity I have no doubt whatever.¹²⁶

Thus, Hudson gave Chaloner’s experiments and “perfect sanity” his full support, attributing Chaloner’s commitment to Bloomingdale as a misunderstanding about the scientific nature of Experimental Psychology on the part of Chaloner’s family and friends, especially because, Hudson argued, Chaloner’s experiments were “in advance of [his] age of scientific research.”¹²⁷

PERSONAL SYMPATHIES AND SANITY IN VIRGINIA

Thus absolved, Chaloner, with expert statements in support of his sanity in hand, made his way quietly back into Virginia, hiding for a time under his alias in Lynchburg, Virginia, while he prepared for court. He had hired lawyers to prepare a case for his legal sanity in Virginia, and in November 1901, the case went to trial.¹²⁸ The case went well. Judge Augustus van Wyck certified Chaloner’s sanity, and Chaloner returned happily to his beloved Virginia estate, The Merry Mills.¹²⁹ He was now a legally sane man in Virginia, but was still considered to be legally insane in New York—a fact that Chaloner and the press would continue to bring up

¹²⁵ Hudson, “To Whom it May Concern,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 159-160.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹²⁸ Bryan, “Johnny Jackanapes,” 9.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

in order to draw attention to his case. Chaloner could no longer step foot in his birth state without facing arrest and permanent involuntary institutionalization in an asylum. For the next 19 years, Chaloner would fight the lunacy laws of New York State through lawsuits and his self-published works.

In Virginia, however, he was greeted by friends and felt that Southerners, Virginians, and most specifically, the community around his estate at The Merry Mills, were supportive of his escape from Bloomingdale and legal battles. For example, speaking to the prevalence of the popular opinion that sane people such as Chaloner were being unjustly committed to insane asylums, Chaloner received a letter from Mary Elizabeth Breen congratulating him on his “safe escape from Bloomingdale. I know how to sympathize with those who are sent there unjustly, for I had a friend who was perfectly sane when sent there, but was by the influence of friends released.”¹³⁰ Showing that members of the general public were aware of psychological experimentation, Mrs. Joel W. Giles offered her support for Chaloner’s psychological experiments in a letter dated October 17, 1901. “Your psychological experiments interest me very deeply inasmuch as I have, in a small degree, been so gifted myself—and this is the first time that I ever saw it alluded to in the newspapers.”¹³¹ It would not have been unusual for a woman during this period to experience some kind of psychological phenomena, especially because of the popularity of Spiritualism during this period when women mediums significantly

¹³⁰ Mary Elizabeth Breen to John Armstrong Chaloner, 10 October 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

¹³¹ Mrs. Joel W. Giles to John Armstrong Chaloner, 17 October 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

outnumbered male mediums.¹³² She even offered to provide Chaloner with “evidence” of her own interactions with psychic phenomena: “I have an idea that few people are gifted with what you term the X-faculty in any degree so I am willing to give evidence of the fact—although I am not often visited with this feeling, if I may so call it—once experienced it is never forgotten.”¹³³

Ultimately then, Chaloner was not alone in his criticisms of commitment procedures at Bloomingdale or mental hospitals in general. What he experienced at the turn of the twentieth century simply reflected the vague and subjective nature of a psychiatrist’s judgments, something well-known to the public. It also came into increased conflict with psychiatrists’ push for professionalization of their discipline as a branch of medical “science.”¹³⁴ The legal part of the commitment process created yet another area in which psychiatrists had to assert their legitimacy and authority as medical men and scientists. Hospital officials, such as Lyon and MacDonald in Chaloner’s case, were challenged by former patients wanting stronger laws to protect asylum patients from the life-determining power of hospital officials and psychiatrists.¹³⁵ It is no surprise that Chaloner wanted to assemble a “council of war of experts Medical, Psychological, and Legal” to restore his legal sanity in New York.¹³⁶

¹³² Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Ed. 2, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001, 23. For an extensive treatment of Spiritualism’s link to scientific progress and the women’s rights movement, see Braude’s *Radical Spirits* and Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

¹³³ Mrs. Joel W. Giles to John Armstrong Chaloner, 17 October 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

¹³⁴ Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion*, 82.

¹³⁵ Grob, *Mad Among Us*, 131.

¹³⁶ John Childe to J. Madison Taylor [draft], June 30, 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Note: John Childe is Chaloner’s alias.

CHAPTER 3:

CHALONER THE “EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST” AND “SCIENTIFIC MEDIUM,” 1911—1917

“The disclosures the spirit message pretends to reveal are too serious to be disclosed lightly, perhaps, and whether one believes in the spiritualistic cult or whether he be a scoffer, the communication itself, which we are printing this morning, ‘makes mighty interestin’ readin’.”

— “Mr. Chaloner takes elevator “down”,” *Virginian* [Richmond, Virginia,] August 5, 1912. Reprinted in Chaloner, *Hell*, 75.

Chaloner believed that he was a true “experimental psychologist”—a man of “science”—who was merely researching the depths of the human mind to discover of what the subconscious was capable. While James, Jastrow, and Hudson all supported Chaloner by pointing to his experiments in psychology, the subconscious, and trance states, each of these men departed from varying degrees with Chaloner’s own theories. It is unclear when precisely Chaloner had begun to assemble his experiments and ideas into a sustained theoretical argument. As early 1901, in letters discussing his legal case, Chaloner made passing reference to his X-faculty “essay” and “X-Faculty paper.” It was not until 1911, however, that Chaloner assembled a treatise on his own theories and had it privately published under the title, *The X-Faculty; Or The Pythagorean Triangle of Psychology*.¹³⁷

In *The X-Faculty*, Chaloner indicated the ideas and books that influenced his vision of experimental psychology by providing a suggested reading list to his readers. The list included Dr. Thompson Jay Hudson's popular book *The Law of Psychic Phenomena; Studies in Psychological Research* by Podmore, M. A.; “that interesting work” *From India to Mars, A Study of a Case of*

¹³⁷ John Childe to J. Madison Taylor [draft], June 30, 1901, and Armistead C. Gordon to John Armstrong Chaloner, July 24, 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Somnambulism by Theodore Flournoy, Professor of Psychology at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, with a preface and translation by Samuel B. Vermilye; and finally “those half dozen pages or so, touching upon automatic writing and talking” by William James in his “standard work,” published in 1890, *The Principles of Psychology*.¹³⁸

Many of Chaloner’s early ideas about the X-Faculty can be ascertained from his correspondence with his friend Armistead C. Gordon and his doctor J. Madison Taylor during his stay at Silas Weir Mitchell’s private clinic. Chaloner agreed with Taylor that Hudson would be a strong, “star” witness to support the credibility of his psychological experiments. Their views are similar: “I agree entirely with Hudson’s working hypothesis,” Chaloner explained, “that [...] ‘the cause of all Psychic phenomena is suggestion.’ There is only one point of possible divergence between the Professor’s view and mine on this head + that is the exact meaning of ‘suggestion.’”¹³⁹ The two men met in Philadelphia for an interview that lasted “several hours,” after which, basing himself on their discussions about Chaloner’s belief in the X-Faculty, Hudson wrote his opinion that Chaloner was sane.¹⁴⁰

Chaloner admitted that he and Hudson differed in their respective definitions of suggestion, but this does not seem to have affected Hudson’s assessment of Chaloner, which was written in 1901 but cited by Chaloner as evidence of his sanity and as support for his experiments throughout his court battles. Hudson explained Chaloner’s X-Faculty, as, “controlled by “suggestion,” which is but another way of stating what Mr. Chaloner has

¹³⁸ Chaloner, *The X-Faculty*, 5.

¹³⁹ John Childe to Dr. J. Madison Taylor, June 30, 1901, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Archives and Special Collections. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. N.B. John Childe was John Armstrong Chaloner’s alias during this period.

¹⁴⁰ Hudson, “To Whom it May Concern,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, 159-163.

discovered by experiment.”¹⁴¹ Hudson also praised Chaloner’s “scientific acumen” and “accord with the trend of modern science” because of his awareness that his X-Faculty was part of his mind and could be controlled by his will; Hudson contrasted this with believers in Spiritism and psychic mediums, who ascribed similar kinds of mental phenomena to “spirits, demons, [and] devils.”¹⁴² In support of Chaloner’s scientific mindset, Hudson wrote, “an ignorant layman enters a spiritualistic circle and develops ‘mediumship,’ say in the form of automatic writing; or, as Mr. Chaloner has more scientifically designated it, ‘graphic automatism.’”¹⁴³ Chaloner was a man of science, not “an ignorant layman” involved in séances and other Spiritualistic activities. “By a series of experiments of the most remarkable character, and conducted on the most exact scientific lines,” Chaloner had, “demonstrated that the ‘X-Faculty’ is simply a heretofore submerged part of his own mental organism, and that as such, it is under the domination of his own will and reason.”¹⁴⁴

Horatio Curtis Wood’s statement also emphasized Chaloner’s belief, at least during this period, that he was a “medium” only in the scientific sense, and was not a Spiritualist medium. Wood asked Chaloner numerous questions about his beliefs regarding his X-Faculty, including: “Do you believe that the results of the X-Faculty are due to the presence of any kind of spirit, or to spiritual influence in you?”; “Do you believe there was anything supernatural in this?”; “Do you believe that the judgments delivered are infallible?”¹⁴⁵ To all of these questions, Chaloner responded, simply, “No.”¹⁴⁶ These questions in particular sought to provide evidence that Chaloner was not experiencing something beyond what would be considered “normal”—

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴² Ibid., 162.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁴⁵ Horatio Curtis Wood, “Statement,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, 151.

¹⁴⁶ Wood, “Statement,” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, 151.

anything consisting of spirit or supernatural messages and delusions of grandeur in which he would think that the messages given to him were given by God and thus could not be incorrect or malicious. In this statement, Chaloner is even quoted as saying, “In other words, I am anti-spiritualistic. I do not believe in spiritualism. As a Christian [...] I disbelieve absolutely that there is any communication whatsoever, direct or indirect, between living human beings and disembodied spirits in this world.”¹⁴⁷ Though mediums during this period were widely accepted, either as entertainers or possessors of a real gift of communication with the spirits of the dead, these prominent psychologists insisted that Chaloner did not believe in Spiritualism, but was a strict Christian and “experimental psychologist.”

DEFENSE VERSUS ABANDONMENT

The same experts who defended Chaloner’s sanity in the courtroom abandoned him in his attempts to be recognized within the psychological community as a legitimate “experimental psychologist.” Throughout his case documents and expert testimony, there is relatively little mention that he was not a Spiritualist and did not believe himself to be communicating with dead spirits. There is much more about the scientific legitimacy of his experiments, however amateur, with his subconscious. But his interest in psychical research and experiments did bring him some attention from professional psychologists. In 1904, Chaloner received a letter from J. H. Hyslop, a professor of ethics and logic at Columbia University, asking Chaloner for money to help fund the ASPR. Hyslop had heard from Taylor that Chaloner had an “interest in the X faculty and the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 152.

subjects of Psychology pertaining to it.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, Chaloner’s wealth, connection with Taylor, and his interest in psychical research were enough to garner him the attention of one of the officers of the ASPR. Yet, his correspondence with Hyslop ended with his respectful rejection of Hyslop’s financial request. And neither James, a former president of the ASPR, nor Jastrow, a more mainstream psychologist, would offer to endorse or edit any of Chaloner’s psychological works.

Although William James did not publicly endorse Chaloner’s work, he did, most likely unknowingly, provide him with a single phrase that Chaloner would cite for the rest of his life—James stated he believed Chaloner to be “possessed of a strongly “mediumistic” or “psychic” temperament.”¹⁴⁹ Chaloner, as well as the press, would capitalize on this phrase, even to the point of calling Chaloner a “medium.”¹⁵⁰ Chaloner himself would cite James in his prologue to his work *The Battle of the Millionaires*: “that is what I am—a Medium—in the language of the late Professor William James, of Harvard—of whom you have doubtless heard.”¹⁵¹ This conflict between science and Spiritualism is apparent throughout the discourse surrounding Chaloner’s writings. William James supported Chaloner’s experimentation with his X-Faculty, and did not think that someone should be condemned as insane on the grounds that the individual was subject to automatism. James wrote:

Whereas most mediums promptly adopt the theory, current in spiritualistic circles, that, these automatisms are due to spirit-control, Mr. Chaloner, prepossessed

¹⁴⁸ J.H. Hyslop to John Armstrong Chaloner, 6 June 1904, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers Archives and Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

¹⁴⁹ James, “Statement” in Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, 158. Newspaper articles would frequently cite the fact that Chaloner had been “called a medium” by William James. For one example, see: “Chaloner has a Sequel to ‘Who’s Looney Now?’” *The Sun*, New York (NY), June 29, 1915, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Richmond (Va.) *Virginian*, August 5, 1912; Richmond (Va.) *Virginian*, August 12, 1912.

¹⁵¹ Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, iv.

against that hypothesis, appears to have set to work systematically (and, as would appear from his narrative, critically) to explore them and determine their significance for himself. [...] In spiritualistic circles these automatisms are regarded as valuable gifts, to be encouraged rather than checked, and asylum doctors hardly ever see them.¹⁵²

James, therefore, praised Chaloner's "systematic" exploration of his X-Faculty as a mental activity rather than a spiritual gift. James thought that Chaloner's automatism was ultimately not abnormal in the context of the current understanding of the subconscious or unconscious mind, and certainly not a marker of insanity; for James, Chaloner's graphic automatism was just a "rarer kind of phenomenon" that should have been "classed under the same psychological head, of a part of the personality, usually unconscious, making irruptions into the conscious part."¹⁵³

It was most likely unsurprising to Chaloner that James agreed with his explanation of how he was able produce automatic writings in a trance state with his subconscious X-Faculty, since Chaloner had read the parts of James' *Principles of Psychology* pertaining to trances, hypnotisms, and automatisms. In this section of his seminal work, James asserted that "Mediumistic possession in all its grades seems to form a perfectly natural special type of alternate personality, and the susceptibility to it in some form is by no means an uncommon gift." Applicable to Chaloner even more specifically, James claimed that "the lowest phase of mediumship is automatic writing, and the lowest grade of that is where the Subject knows what words are coming, but feels impelled to write them as if from without."¹⁵⁴ This "lowest phase"—the not uncommon gift of automatic writing—was what James recognized in Chaloner's experiments with the X-Faculty. It follows that James would not have considered such a common gift to be an indicator or symptom of insanity.

¹⁵² James, "Statement," in Chaloner, *Robbery Under the Law*, 158.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁵⁴ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1890, 393.

While James' assessment of Chaloner and his "mediumistic" abilities was permissive, Jastrow dismissed him as a legitimate "experimental psychologist." Jastrow and Chaloner exchanged letters addressing Chaloner's X-Faculty and other psychological experiments; Jastrow seemed to be genuinely interested in corresponding with Chaloner, as he wrote to Chaloner that he was "again expressing my interest in your communication."¹⁵⁵ But Jastrow was not afraid to tell Chaloner what Chaloner did not want to hear. Jastrow was very methodical and logical, and told Chaloner that "before even considering the possibility of a psychological factor the physical explanations must be found inadequate, and further that to establish even as a plausible possibility the phenomenon as if as psychological in character involves a considerable step from premises to conclusions."¹⁵⁶ Ultimately Jastrow did not agree with Chaloner's conclusions about his ability to move curtains without physical contact, but saw in Chaloner's account of events "ample opportunity for just those forms of suggestion which have entered into many forms of investigation commonly known as psychical research."¹⁵⁷

In specific regards to Chaloner's sanity case, Jastrow judged Chaloner sane. Concerning Chaloner's experiments and automatic writing, he wrote: "Such automatic writing is a well recognized phenomenon occurring not rarely but yet unusually, and finds its place among a series of psychological activities, which are in large part of a complex, co-ordinated and reasoned type, but which are none the less not the intentional expression of the ordinary full conscious thought."¹⁵⁸ In support of Chaloner's automatic writing, Jastrow cited the academic

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Jastrow to John Armstrong Chaloner, 24 January 1911, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers Archives and Special Collections, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., Joseph Jastrow to John Armstrong Chaloner, 24 January 1911, Charlottesville, VA.

¹⁵⁷ Joseph Jastrow to John Armstrong Chaloner, 24 January 1911, John Armstrong Chaloner Papers, Charlottesville, VA.

¹⁵⁸ Jastrow, "Preliminary Opinion" in Chaloner, *Robbery Under Law*, 153.

literature of the period, including works by William James, and Professors Baldwin, Newbold, Patrick, and Binet.¹⁵⁹ Jastrow's only mention of Spiritualism, however, is in relation to James' and Chaloner's use of the terms "medium," "mediumship," and "mediumistic possession."¹⁶⁰ Jastrow noted, in an aside during his discussion about James' views on automatic writing, that James and Chaloner used those terms, "simply as a convenient and intelligent mode of referring to the phenomena" and "not in acceptance of any belief in the theory with which the name originated." Jastrow alluded to the Spiritualist movement and the popular use of the term "medium" to refer to a person who served as a conduit through which spirit messages flowed.¹⁶¹ Jastrow believed that James and Chaloner's use of these terms needed to be clarified and separated from their connection with Spiritualism, which is consistent with Jastrow's negative views towards Spiritualist phenomena. But, it is curious why Chaloner chose to use the term "medium" to describe his abilities. Was it because William James used the term, or because of the interest the term would spark when used in newspapers? Most likely, Chaloner chose to use the term for both reasons.

Chaloner, a devout Episcopalian who held a Master's degree in philosophy from Columbia University and had a love of the Classics, saw Psychology in a different light than most mainstream psychologists at the turn of the twentieth century, as he saw psychology as the study primarily of the soul, which is a fundamentally religious construct. He believed that Psychology was "the only field for investigation (all churches—without offence—having absolutely exceptionlessly no power of miracle) for considering (1) as to whether or not the one

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 154-155.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 154.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 154.

has a soul, (2) what that soul is like here below (3) whether it is immortal.”¹⁶² Thus, in this introduction to his work, Chaloner asserted that he viewed psychology as the study of the soul, a markedly religious or philosophical topic.

Although Chaloner’s work exhibited a religious character because of its focus on the soul, he emphasized that his work was scientific and conjectural in nature, stressing, “*This is a hypothesis, a guess, a mere working-hypothesis.*”¹⁶³ He also used then current scientific antonyms—subconsciousness versus consciousness, subliminal-self versus supra-liminal self, and the X-Faculty versus ego—most likely to justify and legitimize his own view of Psychology at a time when psychologists were increasingly pushing to make the field a “natural science.”¹⁶⁴

After searching through most of Chaloner’s published works, his unpublished correspondence up until the year 1908, and a veritable treasure-trove of turn-of-the-twentieth century newspaper articles, it is clear that Chaloner’s friends and legal council suppressed his theory about the X-Faculty. In his published version of his 1916 suit against Thomas T. Sherman, the legal guardian over Chaloner’s estate after his commitment, which contains all of Chaloner’s arguments for his sanity and against the illegal declaration of him as an insane man in New York, any detailed discussion of his X-Faculty theories are conspicuously absent. Furthermore, a discussion of the “Pythagorean Triangle of Psychology” is plainly missing from the testimony of James, Jastrow, and Hudson reprinted in Chaloner’s book *Robbery Under Law*.

So mostly missing in Chaloner’s legal defense was his theory that a “Pythagorean Triangle” represented the X-Faculty. In *The X-Faculty*, Chaloner hypothesized that the psychology of the human mind could be understood using the symbolism of a right-angle

¹⁶² Chaloner, *The X-Faculty*, 3.

¹⁶³ Chaloner, *The X-Faculty*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

triangle.¹⁶⁵ The hypotenuse, the largest side of the triangle, represented “Philosophy,” and could be represented by blue liquid; the base side of the triangle represented “Temptation,” which was represented by red liquid; and the perpendicular side represented “Conscience,” which was composed of white liquid.¹⁶⁶ Then, according to Chaloner, the liquids of each of the sides would mix to represent the state of a person’s soul depending on the movement of an X- or unknown force—the X-Faculty.¹⁶⁷ Few were interested. Psychologists did not discuss the theory; nor did the public: any significant discussion of the work is absent in newspapers. In general, *The X-Faculty* seems to have been the least popular of all of Chaloner’s published works, although one could argue that it is the most essential for understanding Chaloner’s personality, and more specifically, the theories that led to the experiments that caused his family to commit him to Bloomington.

A WELL-RECEIVED JOURNEY INTO HELL

Compared to his work on the X-Faculty, Chaloner’s work *Hell, Per a Spirit-Message Therefrom (Alleged)*, published only a year later in 1912, received significantly more attention from the public and the press. *Hell* detailed Chaloner’s “alleged” communication with the spirit of his deceased friend Thomas Jefferson Miller, whose spirit was reportedly residing in Hell with Satan himself. Certainly, the title of the work aimed to provoke since it smelled of Spiritualism and séances—topics that captured the public’s interest. While it may seem odd that Chaloner published a book on something he continuously and vehemently proclaimed to despise, he clarified his beliefs on the subject in the press and in the book’s introduction. He worked to

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 12.

ensure newspapers printed what he wanted. One newspaper reporter wrote that Chaloner “sought to impress firmly upon the newspaper correspondents” that he did not believe he was a spiritualist medium.¹⁶⁸ The ensuing quotation the reporter printed from Chaloner was: “I want you to understand--and my veracity has never been called into question--that I did not invent this yarn consciously, nor do I believe a d—d word of it. I do believe that my sub-conscious self, my X-Faculty, did invent it in the guise of the spirit of Miller.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, in his introduction to *Hell*, Chaloner averred, “The writer is a member of the Church of England and a devout believer in all that Church's tenets. He does not, for one moment, doubt the Divine Wisdom displayed by the Founder of Christianity in dropping an impenetrable veil over the future life.”¹⁷⁰

Besides Miller’s descriptions of Hell, which readers and newspapermen enjoyed commenting on, the work focuses on Chaloner’s identity as a “scientific” medium. Miller tells Chaloner that Chaloner is “a martyr to science, to the science of Psychology.”¹⁷¹ Miller then corroborated Chaloner’s view of Psychology presented in *The X-Faculty*, saying, “Psychology means the study of the soul as the Greeks who invented the study taught” and praises Chaloner because he “had the ineffable fortune to be first born a medium, second educated an Episcopalian, and third, trained as a scientist.”¹⁷² This use of the term “medium” to describe Chaloner is consistent with Chaloner’s earlier use. In contrast to his use of the word “medium” to describe himself in a positive light, Chaloner used the word’s traditional meaning when referring to his distaste for “professional mediums.” Chaloner described “modern professional mediums”

¹⁶⁸ “Mr. Chaloner takes elevator ‘down’,” *Virginian* [Richmond, Virginia,] August 5, 1912. Reprinted in John Armstrong Chaloner, *Hell: Per a Spirit-Message Therefrom (Alleged): A Study in Graphic-Automatism*, Roanoke Rapids, NC: Palmetto Press, 1912, 75.

¹⁶⁹ John Armstrong Chaloner, *Hell: Per a Spirit-Message Therefrom (Alleged): A Study in Graphic-Automatism*, Roanoke Rapids, NC: Palmetto Press, 1912, 9.

¹⁷⁰ Chaloner, *Hell*, 4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 23.

as “cheats and charlatans,” as well as “thieves and liars [...]—as rank impostors as that old Hell-hag, Madame Blavatsky” that take gullible peoples’ money.¹⁷³ Therefore, Chaloner—or at the least, his subconscious—placed himself in a category separate from spiritualist mediums, and sought to be recognized for his experiments in psychology.

Americans, and especially his fellow Virginians, were much more interested in *Hell* than in *The X-Faculty*; while reporters and critics often applauded Chaloner for his literary talent, they expressed little interest in his psychological experiments. The Richmond *Times-Dispatch* highlighted Chaloner’s “weird and picturesque language” but went on to propose that Chaloner had “opened up a new, if somewhat red-hot, field of modern literature.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, the *News-Leader* stated that *Hell* was “a wonderful work as books go,” and a writer at the *Evening Journal* gave an even clearer endorsement, stating, “This last work of Mr. Chaloner is literature. John Milton has not got much in the way of word painting on John Armstrong Chaloner [...] The author may rest assured that his book will be read.”¹⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, Chaloner was happy to have support for his literary work that he claimed he was only able to write while using his X-Faculty.

Ultimately, then, Chaloner’s view of Psychology and his own published works on the subject, in comparison to the opinions of prominent psychologists of the period, reveal a distinct effort to separate Psychology and “scientific mediums” or automatists, from popular spiritualist mediums, who believed their mental phenomena came from the power of spirits. Even with his efforts to classify himself as a “scientific” medium and “experimental psychologist,” Chaloner did not gain support for his scientific or psychological work from those who had so thoroughly

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷⁴ “A Message From Hell,” *Times-Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, October 30, 1912, in Chaloner, *Hell*, 92.

¹⁷⁵ *News-Leader*, Richmond, VA, October 28, 1912 and *Evening Journal*, Richmond, VA, October 30, 1912 in Chaloner, *Hell*, 91.

defended his sanity in their written courtroom testimony. Those who had come to his defense had abandoned him—he had to publicize himself using newspaper reporters and his own publishing press, the Palmetto Press of Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Thus, Chaloner was more widely received by the public than by the scientific men he had hoped to be among. He may have been sane and had some legitimate interests, but those attributes by themselves were insufficient to allow a lone investigator, without any affiliation with a university or clinic, into an increasingly professionalized and institutionalized discipline.

CONCLUSION

After years of waging his case, John Armstrong Chaloner won his legal battle for his sanity in New York in 1919, thanks to the efforts of his legal team and his own commitment to his cause. Chaloner also reconciled with his family that year, after years of fighting and discontent. Newspapers, which followed Chaloner's life until his death on June 1, 1935 from lung cancer, had no trouble continuing to find eccentric or peculiar things to report about Chaloner. After Chaloner's former best friend Stanford White was murdered in 1906, reporters sought out Chaloner's opinion about what would be billed the trial of the century. By the early 1930s, newspapers catalogued Chaloner's greater and greater claims on his mediumistic talents, such as prophesying that the French would tunnel under the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁷⁶

Thirty years after John Armstrong Chaloner's death, the prominent and colorful Virginia journalist J. Bryan III, described Chaloner as a person who, "in spirit [...] lived Through the Looking-Glass, a congenial neighbor to the Mad Hatter and the White Knight," and was "as famous in his strange and wild" as any famous American "statesmen or soldiers, scholars, or men of art."¹⁷⁷ These references, mad or weird, to the characters in Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass*, label Chaloner as an eccentric man. Ultimately, one can be confident in asserting that Chaloner was an eccentric, peculiar, and unique person not just for his own time period, but also our own. Whether or not he was really

¹⁷⁶ "'Who's-Looney-Now' Chaloner Sees Millennium Just Ahead: Former Millionaire Eccentric Gets Advice Direct From 'The Unknown;'" French are About to Tunnel Mediterranean." *The Washington Post*, August 12, 1934, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Bryan, "Johnny Jackanapes, 3-4. For more information on J. Bryan III, see: Tarter, Brent and the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*. "Joseph Bryan III (1904–1993)." *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, March 20, 2014.

insane is of little importance to the greater story of his life, a story that reveals an American public terrified of madness, of the possibility of finding oneself, as a sane person, trapped in an asylum. This fear was due, in large part, to the contested definitions of insanity and of diagnostic terms within the medical, psychiatric, and psychological communities, each which struggled to find its place in an increasingly specialized world concerned with being “scientific” in order to be legitimate. In the testimony concerning Chaloner’s sanity, fundamental conflicts between psychiatrists and psychologists are displayed. But, these prominent psychologists, James, Jastrow, and Husdon especially, who jumped to Chaloner’s defense when his sanity was questioned because of his foray into experimental psychology, were silent when it came time for them to legitimize Chaloner as an “experimental psychologist.” He did not hold their interest or sympathies for long after their expert testimonies were secured and their defense of his sanity and the legitimacy of his interests (rather than any putative professional identity) was complete.

The case of “Who’s Looney Now?” may provide historians with more questions than answers regarding Chaloner’s sanity, or lack thereof. But, his story serves as a unique lens through which important strands of history can be understood, including medical, legal, psychological, and public understanding of madness in turn-of-the-twentieth century America, the possible influence that public opinion had on the transformation of lunacy laws and commitment procedures, and how psychiatrists and psychologists worked through their definitions of madness while finding their own specialized places within the scientific, academic, and medical communities.

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