

*Theatre, Society and the Nation*  
*Staging American Identities*

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

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Adobe Caslon 10.5/13 pt    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 80264 4 hardback

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*From British colony to independent  
nation: refashioning identity*

IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, MANY of the settlements in North America underwent a major political and ideological transformation from isolated and dependent colonies to a united and independent nation-state. Writers with differing political perspectives and agenda used drama as a means to help define the values of the inhabitants of the territory and their political relationship with Europe. During this period, plays by Loyalist Americans and by the British military encouraged the loyalty of the settlers to the British crown. Whig or Patriot drama, on the other hand, inspired Americans to rethink their connection with the British government, and began to redefine the American colonies as potentially a separate and independent nation. This chapter will examine the changing constructions of identity in these plays and dialogues, from the early didactic plays in the 1760s that underlined the responsibilities of the American colonies to the British crown, to the drama of the 1770s that, in some cases, promoted a new notion of the nation as independent from Britain.

In eighteenth-century America, prominent religious communities, such as the Puritans in Massachusetts, the Quakers in Pennsylvania and the Presbyterians in New Jersey, disapproved of the theatre. The Massachusetts legislature passed a bill in 1750 prohibiting theatrical performances because they “not only occasion great and unnecessary expenses, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase Immorality, impiety, and contempt of religion.”<sup>1</sup> The Church of England, which dominated the southern states, was more tolerant of theatre, though the Reverend Samuel Davies of Virginia reprimanded his congregation because “plays and romances” were “more read than the History of the blessed Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Religious antipathy to theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth century stunted the growth of American playwriting and performance. On the other hand, pamphlet drama had become important in the religious reformation

movement in Germany in the sixteenth century. The enormous dissemination of religious and political pamphlets from the sixteenth century in Europe manifested the power of printed material (often in dramatic or dialogue form) to educate, instruct and persuade. By the 1760s in the colonies, a history of writing plays as propaganda had already been established. Religious advocates printed dramatic dialogues as a means for teaching virtuous behavior to the young, such as "Dialogue Between Christ, Youth and the Devil" (published anonymously in 1735), or for resolving doctrinal disputes, such as *Dialogue Between a Minister and an Honest Country-Man, Concerning Election and Predestination* (published by John Checkley in 1741). Few American plays appeared before the end of the eighteenth century, and those that were written were often intended only to be read rather than to be performed. Possibly because so many of the colonists looked down on theatre as immoral and frivolous, drama tended to be used more as a means to instruct rather than to entertain. Accordingly, a high proportion of the plays written in America during the 1760s and 1770s were didactic.

The Hallam family, who brought the first major professional touring company (the London Company of Comedians) to the colonies in 1752, resorted to disguising their plays as "moral tracts" in order to find favor with the local authorities.<sup>3</sup> They met with receptive audiences in the southern towns and the prosperous West Indies but had to negotiate their way more carefully in the northern colonies, discovering that resistance was especially strong in New England and also at times in New York and Philadelphia. The play that they performed most often (other than Shakespeare) was George Lillo's *George Barnwell*.<sup>4</sup> Because of its moral instruction to young people, it was more acceptable to religious communities, especially during the Christmas and Easter seasons. In time the Hallam/Douglass company established permanent venues such as the Williamsburg Theatre in 1752 (where George Washington was a frequent member of the audience), the Chapel Street Theatre in New York in 1761 (and, after that was destroyed, the John Street Theatre in 1767), the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia in 1766, and the West Street Theatre in Annapolis and the Church Street Theatre in Charleston in 1773. They developed a touring circuit and performed regularly at these various sites (depending upon the climate of public opinion and such natural disasters as yellow fever epidemics in Philadelphia) until the Continental Congress discouraged theatre performances in 1774, as the colonies prepared for war.

Because they were public forums where large crowds gathered, the newly established theatres in important towns such as New York and Philadelphia

soon became a focus for displays of political sentiment. At performances by the Hallam/Douglass troupe, the audience indicated their sensitivity to the ideological content of the plays.<sup>5</sup> English plays reflecting a Whig perspective, such as Joseph Addison's *Cato* (and even Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*), became especially popular during this period because of their speeches advocating freedom from imperial oppression.<sup>6</sup> In some cases strong political feelings led to riots. The Sons of Liberty, for example, disrupted the activities of the Chapel Street Theatre in New York during protests associated with the Stamp Act. A crowd invaded the audience that was attending a performance, one person was killed in the melee and the rioters tore down and burned the theatre "to the Satisfaction of many at this distressed Time, and to the great Grievance of those less inclined for the Publick Good."<sup>7</sup>

With the repeal of the Stamp Act, political protests quieted down. But in order to curry favor, the actors changed their name from the London Comedians to the American Company and introduced American pieces that would appeal to their local audience, such as Thomas Forrest's *The Disappointment* (which had to be removed from the program because it threatened to cause a local scandal) and Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*. Furthermore, the theatre company introduced politically relevant material to otherwise neutral performances such as at a Philadelphia performance of *Hamlet* in 1773, when they added a prologue which referred to the "sweets of Liberty."<sup>8</sup>

The company also introduced other aspects of indigenous culture in their performances to gain local support. In 1767, after constructing a new theatre in New York at John Street to replace the one that had been destroyed, the American Company provided box seats to Cherokee Indian Chiefs (who were passing through on their way to Albany to negotiate a treaty and were being hosted by General Gage) for a performance of *Richard III*. The event turned into a major occasion. According to the local press, "The Expectation of seeing the Indian Chiefs, at the Play on Monday Night, occasion'd a great Concourse of People, the House was crowded, and it is said great Numbers were obliged to go away for want of Room."<sup>9</sup> On their return to New York after signing the treaty, the Indians agreed to perform a war dance on the stage following a performance of the play, *The Wonder! A Woman Keeps a Secret!* Ostensibly to prevent a disturbance by those uncomfortable with Indians in war paint but obviously selling the event in the same stroke, the manager warned in his advertising, "It is humbly presumed, that no Part of the Audience will forget the proper Decorum so essential to all public Assemblies, particularly on this Occasion, as the Persons who have

condescended to contribute to their Entertainment, are of Rank and Consequence in their own Country" (*New York Journal*, 7 April 1768). The unusual event, which included a piece "for the Entertainment of the CHEROKEE CHIEFS and WARRIORS" about Harlequin, took place without incident. Again this performance was in a sense an attempt by the manager to develop the notion of Native American culture on the stage, in contrast to the English farces and tragedies that represented the bulk of their repertory.

In the early 1770s members of the audience, particularly in the cheaper seats, continued occasionally to disrupt performances for political reasons. In Philadelphia in 1772, members of the gallery objected to the Tory sentiments of *A Word to the Wise*. A critic, commenting on the disturbances, chastised the gallery for requesting partisan songs from the performers.<sup>10</sup> Such disturbances often reflected social and class differences. The artisans and mechanics tended to be the most vocal in announcing their anti-British feelings in the theatres.<sup>11</sup> In December 1772 the Philadelphia theatre experienced a riot outside the gallery door, followed by a burglary in which the robbers removed "the iron spikes which divide the galleries from the upper boxes" in a symbolic act against the class divisions in the theatre (and society).<sup>12</sup> The event indicates an attempt by American-Patriot demonstrators to use the theatre symbolically to redefine the nation, moving towards a more egalitarian notion of national identity.

Other symbolic activity by the Sons of Liberty and like-minded Patriot agitators often took on a decidedly theatrical appearance, such as demonstrations in which they hanged British leaders in effigy and erected liberty poles. For example, the perpetrators of the Boston Tea Party performed a symbolic act by disguising themselves as Tuscarora Indians, thereby identifying themselves as *natives* of America rather than as British *settlers*.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, these events involved a certain amount of acting as well as set, costumes and props. For example, the press reported that in Wilmington in 1766 at the height of the stamp act crisis,

a great Number of People again assembled, and produced an Effigy of LIBERTY, which they put into a Coffin, and marched in solemn Procession to the Church-Yard, a Drum in Mourning beating before them, and the Town Bells, muffled, ringing a doleful Knell at the same Time; But before they committed the Body to the Ground, they thought it advisable to feel its Pulse; and when finding some Remains of Life, they returned back to a Bonfire ready prepared, placed the Effigy before it in a large Two-armed Chair, and concluded the Evening with Rejoicings, on finding that LIBERTY had still an Existence in the COLONIES.<sup>14</sup>

In 1774, with the threat of war on the horizon and in order to concentrate the minds and energies of the Patriots, the Continental Congress declared its disapproval of theatrical entertainment in the colonies, resolving to “discountenance and discourage, every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock fighting, exhibition of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments.”<sup>15</sup> The American Company emigrated to the West Indies where they remained for the duration of the war. For most of the war years American Patriots refrained from theatre performances and produced drama mainly in the form of pamphlet plays, to be read rather than staged.

### Early dramatic propaganda: loyalty to King and country

Political drama began early in the colonies. *Androboros*, the first play to be printed in the British colonies in America, was a Swiftian satire on the political intrigues of New York. Robert Hunter, the British-appointed Governor of New York, published his “biographical farce in three acts” in 1714 or 1715.<sup>16</sup> The play, which satirized his political enemies and local government, is an amusing and irreverent picture of legislative assemblies and power politics, with thinly disguised portraits of the Governor himself, his political friends and his opponents. In an early scene, the legislative assembly (which seems to be located in a sort of mental institution) is shown to be in chaos as representatives try to overthrow the rules and laws in a spirit of anarchy. Coxcomb, one of the opponents of the Keeper (i.e. the Governor), moves and the House agrees “That neither this House, or they whom we Represent are bound by any Laws, Rules or Customs, any Law, Rule or Custom to the Contrary Notwithstanding” and Mulligrub (another opponent), resolves, “That this House disclaims all Powers, Preheminencies or Authoritys, except it’s own.” Solemn, a supporter of the status quo (and evidently representing a friend of the Governor), opposes the motions. Recalling the origins of the assembly, he attacks the delegates for their abuse of power and their disloyalty to the higher authority (i.e. the Governor and Britain):

Here we are Maintain’d at their Charge with Food and Rayment suitable to our Condition, and the Fabrick kept in Repair at the no small Annual Expences of our Land-Lords. And what Returns do we make? Have not many of us from our private Cells thrown our Filth and Ordure in their Faces? And now in a Collective Body we are about to throw more filthy Resolves at them. (p. 4)

For his pains, Solemn is expelled from the assembly, and Coxcomb proposes that the Keeper “ought to be dismiss’t from having any further Autho[rity over] us.” The Keeper enters and terminates the session by ordering the representatives, “To your Kennels, ye Hounds” (p. 8). Having been temporarily thwarted, the opponents of the Keeper then concoct a new scheme to gain independence by creating a religious organization. Fizzle (another opponent) argues, “You see he can Dissolve our Senate with a Crack of his Whip, so there is nothing to be done that way. Let us incorporate our selves into a Consistory; That I believe He dare not touch, without being Reputed an Enemy to the Consistory; and if he does, we may hunt him down” (p. 9). Moreover, Fizzle comes up with a plan to discredit the Keeper by falsely accusing him of befouling the holy vestments of the church. The conspirators finally decide to get rid of the Keeper by means of a trap door. In the denouement Androboros, an opponent who is temporarily blinded, falls down the trap that was intended to ensnare the Keeper. The conspirators, trying to save him, plunge in after him in slapstick comedy tradition, leaving the Keeper in control. The farce discredited the political opponents of the author, strengthened his position as the British Governor of New York, and reaffirmed the loyalty of the colony to the British Crown.

No other play texts written in the English colonies of America have been discovered for the period from 1715 to 1764, but in 1764 two plays were published that similarly advocated the loyalty of American settlers to the British Crown. Both plays commented on the Paxton Rebellion, an uprising in western Pennsylvania in which settlers from the outlying districts displayed their anger at the inadequate provisions made by the colonial authorities to protect their interests. Following the first wave of Pontiac’s insurrection in which his and other tribes attacked British forts and settlements, the Paxton rebels attacked Indian villages and marched on Philadelphia in pursuit of Indians who had sought shelter there. The events obviously frightened the inhabitants of Philadelphia, and, without the skillful intervention of Benjamin Franklin, it seems that the riotous crowd might have attacked the local residents and/or been massacred by the British militia.<sup>17</sup>

Both *The Paxton Boys* and *A Dialogue, Containing some Reflections on the late Declaration and Remonstrance, Of the Back-Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania* were published anonymously in the same year as the Paxton rebellion. *The Paxton Boys*, which was reprinted twice in the same year, derided the rebellion and the support given to it by the Presbyterians, and evoked sympathy for the Quakers, the Church of England and the

British monarchy. The play ridiculed the local citizens of Philadelphia for their cowardice, the rebels for their divisive actions, and the Presbyterians for conspiring to aid the rebels. One of the main villains of the piece, a loudmouthed anti-monarchist Presbyterian whose ancestors supported the Cromwellian rebellion in England, claims,

I would freely Sacrifice my Life and Fortune for this Cause, rather than [that] those Miscreants [*sic*] of the Establish'd Church of *England*, or those R[asca]ls the Q[uaker]s, should continue [any] longer at the head of Government. (p. 7)

The Presbyterian boasts that he has collected thousands of pounds in support of the rebels and that he had distributed money, powder and ammunition to them as they approached Philadelphia. He vows to attack the city, "Now we go on Triumphantly, let us Extipate [*sic*] those People, Root and Branch, and not leave one Soul alive . . ." (p. 8). A Quaker confronts him and discovers his plot to overthrow the government. But the Quaker, as a pacifist, is then faced with the moral dilemma of whether to resort to arms against the conspirator. When the Quaker accuses the Presbyterian of being a dissident, the Presbyterian identifies him likewise as a dissident because of his religion. The Quaker reacts angrily:

But my Disenting [*sic*] does not proceed from any dislike to the King, or the Government, but from a Religious scruple of Conscience in bearing Arms, but thou art a Desenter [*sic*] from the wickedness of thy heart, like fallen Angels, and let me tell thee, that unless thou mends thy ways, thy condition may be like unto theirs. (p. 15)

The play ends with the arrival of the rebellious Paxton Boys in Philadelphia and the Quaker vowing to fight the Presbyterian, "'tis Time to Arm, and do thou attack me if thou dares, and thou shalt find that I have Courage and Strength sufficient, to trample thee under my Feet" (p. 15).

*The Paxton Boys* focused on the responsibility of the citizens of the colony to defend themselves. Although the British militia was mentioned, the rhetoric of the play did not emphasize the obligation of the British government and British military to maintain law and order. The playwright clearly believed that it was the responsibility of the Philadelphia citizens to employ armed force to quash rebellion, and in the play he situated the Quaker in a pivotal position in order to make the case. The play outlined the duty of the citizens to take responsibility for ensuring their own safety, and it added a moral coda after the final speech to emphasize its message:

Stir then good People be not still nor quiet,  
 Rouze up yourselves take Arms and quell the Riot;  
 Such Wild-fire Chaps may, dangerous Mischeifs [*sic*] raise,  
 And se[e] unthinking People in a blaze. (p. 15)

In a sense, therefore, *The Paxton Boys* identified the civic responsibilities of Philadelphia citizens as British subjects. The author indicated that Philadelphians should show their allegiance to the British Crown, not as passive subjects reliant on the British military for their protection, but as active citizens ready to fight alongside the British military as a local militia. The play portrayed the Presbyterian rebel as the villain of the piece because he wanted to overthrow the colonial government and replace it with an anti-monarchist government. The author used the Quaker as a protagonist with whom the readership could empathize, moving from a position of pacifism to militarism in defense of the colony.

*A Dialogue, Containing some Reflections on the late Declaration and Remonstrance, Of the Back-Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania* tackled the same events. The frontispiece of the text, which indicated that the author was “a Member of that Community,” underscored the rhetorical intention of the piece in its subtitle: “With a serious and short Address, to those Presbyterians, who (to their dishonor) have too much abetted, and conniv’d at the late Insurrection.”

Unlike *The Paxton Boys* which contained some dramatic moments, *A Dialogue* . . . was little more than a political conversation about the rights and wrongs of the recent events. Three characters – Positive, Zealot and Lovell – speak their positions, with the author clearly siding with Lovell. Positive declares his support for the actions of the Presbyterians in attacking and killing the Indians, marching on Philadelphia and presenting their written demands. Zealot, who has participated with Positive in composing the rebels’ demands, expresses his concern that their document suffers from faulty reasoning and that their actions may be construed as traitorous to the government. Lovell denounces their actions and attacks their declared grievances, criticizing the rebel document point by point.

The play develops into a discourse on the nature of good citizenship. Lovell attacks the Presbyterians for having persecuted both the Indians and the Quakers, and he argues that the Indians are becoming good Christian citizens and require government assistance. Positive opposes this:

Christians! I swear it can’t be true; nor shall this, or any Thing you can advance in their Favour, alter my fix’d Opinion of them; nay, if I tho’t

that any of their Colour was to be admitted into the Heavenly World, I would not desire to go there myself. (p. 9)

Discovering that Positive is too bigoted to accept that Indians might become Christians, Lovell changes tack to suggest that the Presbyterians have made government assistance to the Indians necessary by their rebellious actions:

As to the great Expence you complain of, are not you yourselves the absolute Cause of it? . . . And did not you oblige them to take those distressed People under their fatherly Protection, to save a considerable Number from Destruction? And where could they be safer than here, from the Fury and Rage of an incensed, riotous and lawless Mob? You are the last that should complain of this Expence, as you yourselves are the Occasion of it. (p. 10)

Furthermore, Lovell argues that the actions taken by the Paxton Boys are no less than seditious and would have landed them on the gallows in England. He compares their professed loyalty to King George III to that of Judas when he kissed Jesus, and declares them to be “dangerous to the Commonwealth; and, if not nipt in the Bud, God only knows where such unwarrantable practices may end” (p. 11). When Zealot asks why their marching on Philadelphia was wrong since they did not harm anyone and “were very civil,” Lovell responds by calling the rebels worse than highway robbers. “Tumult, Sedition and Rebellion . . . are more inexcusable than [the activities of the highway robbers] who have sometimes a better Right to plead Necessity.” In a thinly disguised plea from the author, Lovell calls on the Presbyterians for a proper show of loyalty to the King, for a respect for law and order, and for civility towards all their neighbors.

*Androboros*, *The Paxton Boys*, and *A Dialogue, Containing Some Reflections* . . . all essentially supported the status quo of British rule in America and denounced acts of disobedience or rebellion. All three plays ridiculed local political and religious figures who challenged the authority of the colonial government. *Androboros* lampooned rebellious local assemblies. *The Paxton Boys* and *A Dialogue, Containing Some Reflections* . . . criticized rebellious settlers and their supporters. The good citizen was shown to be a loyal British subject.

### Transitional plays

Following the French and Indian War which ended in 1763, the relationship between Britain and her American colonies began to deteriorate. The

British government tried to place a greater share of the financial burden for running the colonies on the shoulders of the colonies themselves. At the same time the colonies sought greater provision for self-rule, resenting British interference in their political and economic affairs. The British introduced more stringent measures of control and taxation that met with numerous acts of civil disobedience such as the Stamp Act riots in 1765. In the wake of the dispute over the Stamp Act, the ideological discourse in American plays and dramatic dialogues began to change as settlers questioned the benefits of colonial dependency. The anti-colonial attitudes stimulated a chauvinistic pride in an American as distinct from a British identity, amidst a growing tide of nationalism. *Ponteach; Or, the Savages of America*, which has been attributed to the Massachusetts-born Robert Rogers and was printed in London in 1766, marked a transition away from the rhetoric of loyalty to the British Crown. The author had served as a major in the British army and had personally negotiated with Pontiac for the right of the British to cross his lands during the French and Indian War.<sup>18</sup> Pontiac had conceded the right of passage on the agreement that his people would be treated with respect. When they were not, Pontiac organized other tribes to help him mount a war against the British-held forts and the surrounding settlements in the west in order to drive them back across the Allegheny Mountains. Like *A Dialogue, Containing Some Reflections . . .*, Rogers's play portrayed Indians in a more sympathetic light than their adversaries. Despite the insurrection threatening the lives of the settlers, the five-act tragedy justified revenge by the Indians on the white settlements and outposts because of the poor treatment they were receiving. It depicted a frontier society ruined by personal greed and ambition. The first act demonstrated the ways in which traders, hunters, the military and the English administration all connived to take advantage of the Native American. McDole, a trader, sums up the attitude of the whites in boasting, "Our fundamental Maxim is this, That it's no Crime to cheat and gull an Indian" (p. 4). The traders alter the scales to deprive the Indians of a just price for their goods and they get them drunk on rum. The hunters murder them and steal their pelts. The military ignore their complaints, and the representatives of the Crown steal their gifts to the King and the King's gifts to them. Ponteach, the Indian chief whose characterization seems to have been influenced by the popular eighteenth-century notion of the "noble savage" that Rousseau was articulating at the same time in Europe, warns the administrators:

Tell your King from me,  
That first or last a Rogue will be detected,

That I have Warriors, am myself a King,  
 And will be honour'd and obey'd as such;  
 Tell him my Subjects shall not be oppress'd,  
 But I will seek Redress and take Revenge. (p. 24)

Subsequently, the clergy also come in for criticism when an immoral French priest, who resorts to conjuring tricks to impress the Indians with his religion, tries to rape an Indian princess. After Ponteach's son intervenes and prevents the rape, the priest improvises a novel doctrine to justify his lustful actions:

I have a Dispensation from St. *Peter*  
 To quench the Fire of Love when it grows painful.  
 This makes it innocent like Marriage Vows;  
 And all our holy Priests, and she herself,  
 Commits no Sin in this Relief of Nature:  
 For, being holy, there is no Pollution  
 Communicated from us as from others;  
 Nay, Maids are holy after we've enjoyed them,  
 And should the Seed take Root, the Fruit is pure. (p. 72)

The play justifies Ponteach's rebellion as an act of retribution for all the mistreatment the Indians have received. However, the Indians seem only slightly more moral than their English oppressors because many of them, including Ponteach and his son Philip, hatch their own plots for personal gain. Some of the later scenes of revenge by the Indians undermine the audience's sympathy that has been built up in the first scenes of the play. For example, in one scene the Indians play with the scalps of the white men that they have killed.

Nevertheless, in criticizing the British treatment of the Indian, and ultimately justifying the rebellion, *Ponteach* represented an ideological transition in American playwriting. Rather than expressing an underlying loyalty to the government or the British Crown, the play justified greater Indian independence and, by implication, rebellious activity against the British government.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the play, Ponteach has lost his lands but not his spirit of rebellion, and he continues to seek revenge:

But witness for me to your new base Lords,  
 That my unconquer'd Mind defies them still;  
 And though I fly, 'tis on the Wings of Hope.  
 Yes, I will hence where there's no *British* Foe,  
 And wait a Respite from this Storm of Woe;

Beget more Sons, fresh Troops collect and arm,  
 And other Schemes of future Greatness form;  
*Britons* may boast, the Gods may have their Will,  
*Ponteach* I am, and shall be *Ponteach* still. (p. 110)

*The Candidates; or, the Humours of a Virginia Election*, a satirical farce on election practices by Robert Munford, indicated a different type of transition. While far from justifying rebellion, it implied a subtle discursive move towards responsible self-government. Munford, who owned one of the largest estates in Virginia and served in the House of Burgesses from 1765 to 1775, wrote from experience about the corrupt practices in local elections. He may have intended his play, which was written in 1770 or 1771, for the Hallam/Douglass troupe but, unlike his later play *The Patriots*, there is no evidence of a performance or publication during his lifetime, nor until his son published it in 1798.<sup>20</sup> The play upheld the patrician values of the land-holding gentry and attacked self-serving politicians who deluded the voters by spreading rumors against upright candidates. Munford, like other Virginian landholders, regarded it as a moral duty for men of his class to serve the common people as elected representatives in the House of Burgesses, even though the position was without pay and interfered with the responsibilities of running an estate. Like George Washington, who often complained of the burden of public office, the central character Wou'dbe (the would-be representative) declares, "It surely is the duty of every man who has abilities to serve his country, to take up the burden, and bear it with patience" (p. 42).

Alongside two virtuous political figures – Worthy (an incumbent representative who has decided not to seek re-election) and Wou'dbe – Munford juxtaposed Strutabout, a dandy, Sir John Toddy, an alcoholic, and Small-hopes, a gentleman interested in horses. Through the character of Wou'dbe, the author deplored the lack of suitable candidates for electoral office:

STRUTABOUT. Sir, I am as capable of serving the people as yourself; and let me tell you, sir, my sole intention in offering myself is, that I may redress the many and heavy grievances you have imposed upon this poor county.

WOU'DBE. Poor, indeed, when you are believed, or when coxcombs and jockies [*sic*] can impose themselves upon it for men of learning. (pp. 34-5)

The play provides a remarkable picture of eighteenth-century election campaigns. Because alcohol features in many of the scenes, and because

drunkenness is used for satirical effect, the playwright evidently wished his audience to recognize the importance of soberly electing their leaders. Strutabout employs liquor to buy votes, while Worthy (speaking on behalf of the playwright) laments, "I'm sorry, my countymen, for the sake of a little toddy, can be induced to behave in a manner so contradictory to the candour and integrity which always should prevail among mankind" (p. 45). At a campaign barbecue, Sir John Toddy and his friends Mr. and Mrs. Guzzle get so drunk that Sir John falls and cannot get up and Mrs. Guzzle passes out. Guzzle plays a trick on his wife and the disgraced politician by dragging her sleeping body on top of Sir John. In order to persuade her husband that she has not been unfaithful, the awakened Mrs. Guzzle beats Sir John (whom she does not recognize) shouting, "I'll learn you to cuckold a man without letting his wife know it" (p. 40). At the same time as amusing the audience, the playwright provided a serious insight into the hazards of alcohol abuse.

The author also inserted another serious theme into the comedy – that elected representatives should act independently of their constituencies and maintain their right to make unpopular decisions. Wou'dbe at one point in the campaign is blamed for high taxation. He counters that it is the entire legislative body rather than one individual that should take responsibility for such actions. He refuses to make popular promises (such as lowering taxes) in order to get elected. In the playwright's view, political leaders should be expected to make objective decisions rather than acting in their own or their constituents' interests, and their re-election campaign should not be adversely affected by having to make unpopular decisions.

At the end of *The Candidates*, Worthy reverses his decision to retire from politics and agrees to stand for re-election in order that Wou'dbe will also be elected. The play presents his action as one of admirable self-sacrifice on behalf of the interests of the community, rather than for self-aggrandizement. In a remarkable election scene in which the candidates are chosen by a voice vote with the candidates thanking each voter for his vote (which, rather than a secret ballot, was presumably the custom of the day), the electorate choose the right men and the play ends happily with expressions of self-congratulation, "We have done as we ought, we have elected the ablest" (p. 50). As in *The Paxton Boys*, the playwright added a moral coda to clarify his didactic intentions,

Henceforth, let those who pray for wholesome laws,  
 And all well-wishers to their country's cause,  
 Like us refuse a coxcomb – choose a man –  
 Then let our senate blunder if it can. (p. 51)

The play focused on the high moral responsibility that political representation entailed and the need for citizens to discriminate between worthy and unworthy politicians. In a sense, it is a perennial issue. The malaise of voters in the twentieth-first century perhaps mirrors Munford's concerns in the eighteenth century that elected officials should not be elected on the basis of sectional and personal interests but for their integrity, their ability and their responsibility to the community as a whole.

*The Candidates* also reflected the growing self-reliance of the colony on the leadership of their own elected representatives. Unlike *The Paxton Boys*, *A Dialogue Containing Some Reflections . . .*, or *Ponteach*, there is no mention of the British government or loyalty to the Crown. Munford favored the independence of the representatives in running the affairs of the colony. Assuming that the play was not altered between its date of original composition in 1770–1 and its publication in 1798, one can see implicit in *The Candidates* a subtle transition from advocating political dependence on the British Crown towards seeking a state of independence. Munford portrayed the growing sense of political responsibility that would ultimately lead to self-government. In a mood of self-congratulation at the end of the play that reflects the transition, Wou'dbe uses prescient words in thanking his supporters for electing Worthy and him. "You have in that, shewn your judgment, and a spirit of independence becoming Virginians" (p. 50).

### College dialogues

Another dramatic form that manifested the changing political discourse in the 1760s was the dramatic dialogue that was presented as part of college commencement exercises. Despite religious reservations, American colleges had occasionally staged theatrical events from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Students at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, for example, performed a "pastoral colloquy" in 1702, and by 1736 they were staging plays such as Addison's *Cato*. By the middle of the century, college commencement ceremonies in the British colonies made use of dramatic dialogues. Although these were more exercises in rhetoric and public oratory than theatrical events, they used dramatic form to comment on current affairs at a public occasion and they manifested some of the changes in political thinking. In the early days these performances favored a loyalist stance. For example, at the 1761 commencement in the College of Philadelphia (later renamed the University of Pennsylvania), *An Exercise Consisting of a Dialogue and Ode, Sacred to the Memory of his late Gracious*

*Majesty George II* glorified the reign of the previous King of England and expressed gratitude for his benevolent influence over the American colonies:

Beneath his equal sway,  
Oppression was not; justice poiz'd her scale;  
No law was trampled, and no right deny'd;  
The peasant flourish'd, and the merchant smil'd.  
And oh! my friend, to what amazing height  
Of sudden grandeur, did his nursing care  
Up-raise these colonies. (p. 5)

This was followed in the next year by *An Exercise Containing a Dialogue and Ode On The Accession of His present gracious Majesty, George III*<sup>21</sup> that was again obsequious in its idolatry of the new monarch:

Bound every Heart with Joy, and every Breast  
Pout the warm Tribute of a grateful Praise!  
For o'er the Realms of Britain reigns supreme,  
The darling of his People, George the Good. (p. 5)

Likewise at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), a musical tribute entitled *The Military Glory of Great Britain* was performed in 1762 to assert the might of the British war machine. Praising the military victories of the recent past in various parts of the globe, the piece predicted a glorious victory for Britain in the French and Indian War, and the punishment of her enemies:

Ye Sons of War, pursue the Foe;  
Your Albemarle has struck th'auspicious Blow.  
See, Victory waits with laurel-Wreath to crown  
Your Temples; fondly hovering round  
Your glittering Arm. 'Tis Courage fights,  
Courage conquers. Pour your Wrath abroad;  
With martial Sound  
The Foe confound;  
Assert your British Rights;  
And bid them feel the Weight of your avenging Rod. (pp. 13-14)

In the following year, the *Dialogue* in the commencement exercises at the College of Philadelphia praised the newly attained peace, and credited King George:

George gave the word – and bade mankind repose –  
 Contending Monarchs blush'd that they were foes.  
 (*An Exercise Containing a Dialogue and Ode on the  
 Occasion of Peace*, p. 75)

The ode re-emphasized the students' loyalty to the British empire:

May *Britain's* glory still increase,  
 Her fame immortal be,  
 Whose sons make war to purchase *peace*,  
 And conquer to set free. (p. 80)

In the wake of the Stamp Act controversy, loyalist pieces began to give way to expressions of incipient nationalism such as *An Exercise containing a Dialogue and two Odes* that was performed at the College of Philadelphia commencement in 1766. Although acknowledging allegiance to George III – “gracious George shall reign the Friend of Justice and of Man” (p. 6) – the piece used the American Indian enslaved by the Spanish<sup>22</sup> as a symbol for the perceived loss of freedom amongst the colonies:

Say, what are all the Joys  
 Which vernal Suns, and vernal Scenes inspire  
 Where sacred Freedom, from her native Skies,  
 Deigns not to shed her more enlivening Rays?  
 Ask the wild *Indian*, with the Chains opprest  
 Of Spanish Slavery, Cruelty and Death –  
 Can *his* Heart feel that Happiness replete,  
 That glow of Transport, and that general Joy. (p. 4)

The piece indirectly criticized the British government by praising the Whig members of parliament who took the side of the Americans, and it underlined the importance of the concept of liberty in the colonies:

Hail Heaven-descended, sacred Liberty!  
 How blest the Land where thou shalt deign to dwell. (p. 5)

A similar approach was taken by *A Poem on the Rising Glory of America being an Exercise delivered at the public Commencement at Nassau-Hall in 1771* written by two Princeton students – Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge – who would become well-known Patriot writers during the War of Independence. The characters in the dialogue compare the New World favorably with Europe, praising its geographical qualities and predicting scientific and literary greatness. While showing allegiance to the

Crown, the piece emphasized the virtue of “freedom” rather than subservience. It justified the recent actions of settlers to protect their rights, and, moreover, it predicted that such heroic actions of the past would be surpassed by greater patriotic actions in the future:

And here fair freedom shall forever reign.  
 I see a train, a glorious train appear,  
 Of Patriots plac'd in equal fame with those  
 Who nobly fell for Athens or for Rome.  
 The sons of Boston resolute and brave  
 The firm supporters of our injur'd rights,  
 Shall lose their splendours in the brighter beams  
 Of patriots fam'd and heroes yet unborn. (p. 23)

Implicit in the poem was an emerging notion of a new nation, equal to the states of Europe and with a glorious future that would evolve from the actions of Patriots who would continue to fight for the legitimate rights of the settlers.

By 1775 the academic exercises had grown more explicitly militant. The British government passed the “Intolerable Acts” in 1774 that closed Boston harbor and replaced the local government in the Massachusetts colony with direct military rule. With the encouragement of politicians from the Whig party in England who recommended greater liberty for the Americans, delegates of the thirteen colonies met at the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia to decide on a course of action. In the midst of the debate, Paul Revere arrived by horseback with the radical Suffolk Resolves of Massachusetts in his saddlebags. The Resolves, which called for an embargo on trade with Britain and for the Massachusetts colony to arm itself and behave like an independent state until the British government repealed the “Intolerable Acts,” were endorsed by the Congress. The British government and the colony of Massachusetts began to prepare for war. Settlers in Massachusetts and eventually in other colonies had to decide which side to take – whether to fight for independence or to remain loyal to the Crown, a difficult decision that in many cases divided friends and families. In April 1775 General Gage, who had been appointed military governor of Massachusetts during the previous year, dispatched 700 British soldiers to seize the military supplies that the Americans had been stockpiling in Concord. American minutemen fired on them as they marched through Lexington and into Concord and the War of Independence had begun.

At the 1775 commencement of the College of Philadelphia, which took place shortly after the outbreak of the War of Independence, a dramatic exercise was “hastily thrown together to supply the Place of another Exercise” (p. 2). The lines of earlier dialogues and odes were interpolated and transformed in an attempt to bring them up to date with the changing sentiment in the country. Altering the 1761 exercise which had lamented the death of George II, the writer replaced the English monarch with Thomas Penn, a local man who had recently died, to give the piece much more of a nationalistic character. By contrast with the earlier lines which had praised George II for “his nursing care [to] / Up-raise his colonies,” the new piece eulogized Thomas Penn:

And oh! my friend! to what amazing height  
Of sudden grandeur, did his nursing care  
Up-raise his country. (p. 5)

The dialogue commented on the recent outbreak of warfare, the British blockade of the harbors and the Americans’ boycott of English goods, and it lamented the deterioration in the relationship between the American colonies and the British government that had led ultimately to bloodshed:

Yet other causes damp this festal day –  
When *peace* is fled – when sacred *freedom* mourns,  
And her fair sister *commerce*, by her side  
Sits *bound in fetters* – when untwisted lies  
The golden chord of mutual trust and love  
That should unite the *parent* and the *child*,  
And slaughter’d brethren strew th’ensanguin’d plain. (p. 5)

The piece also updated (from the 1766 commencement exercise) the list of Whig members of parliament who had supported the American cause, and, without explicitly recommending independence, encouraged Patriots to maintain their determination to stand up for their rights:

Attend! be firm! ye fathers of the state!  
Ye chosen bands, who for your country weal  
With rigid self-denial, sacrifice  
your private ease, – let wisdom be your guide,  
And zeal enlightened see the ardent flame,  
Which yet shall purge and renovate the land. (p. 7)

### Loyalist propaganda plays

As Patriot activity became more rebellious during the early 1770s, a pamphlet war developed in which ideologues of different political perspectives defined their notions of an appropriate future for the American colonies. Loyalist and Patriot writers employed satire and farce in pamphlet plays to comment on current events and to urge the settlers to remain loyal to the British crown or to agitate for open rebellion. In a style reminiscent of *Androboros*, several of the Loyalist writers ridiculed the democratic process of the representative assemblies in the colonies.<sup>23</sup> Two Tories published dramatic dialogues to lampoon the Continental Congress of 1774: *A Dialogue, Between a Southern Delegate, and His Spouse, on His Return from the Grand Continental Congress and Debates at the Robin-Hood Society in the City of New-York, On Monday Night 19th of July, 1774*.

The unknown author of the first dialogue, employing the pseudonym "Mary V.V.," dedicated the piece "to the Married Ladies of America," and demonstrated that the females left at home were wiser than their wayward husbands who had attended the Congress. Through a female protagonist, the author maintained that the Patriot politicians had arrived with a mandate to negotiate with the Crown but were swept away in a hysteria of rebellion.<sup>24</sup> The dialogue begins as a comical argument between a timid delegate and his disapproving wife who argue over the alcohol-induced decisions by the Congress. But the tone of the debate becomes more serious as the wife warns of the possible consequences of endorsing the radical Suffolk Resolves. Asking rhetorically, "Can you hope, any State, will bear such Insult," she warns that, "As sure as you are born, this will at last end in Blood." Referring to a conspiracy theory that was prevalent at the time,<sup>25</sup> she intimates that the Congress is acting under instructions from an anti-governmental "Cabal" which is "little short, of High Treason" (p. 10). She also predicts that the decision by the Congress to boycott English goods will only make the people of the colonies suffer.

Your Non-Imports, and Exports, are full fraught with Ruin,  
Of thousands, and thousands, the utter Undoing;  
While, without daring to bite, you're shewing your Teeth,  
You've contriv'd to starve, all the poor People to death. (p. 11)

While the delegate pleads impotence to influence his wife much less a whole assembly, she admonishes him for the arrogance of the Congress

and its treatment of the British parliament and she prophesies dreadful consequences:

Instead of imploring, their Justice, or Pity,  
 You treat Parliament, like a Pack, of Banditti:  
 Instead of Addresses, fram'd on Truth, and on Reason,  
 They breathe nothing, but Insult, Rebellion, and Treason;  
 Instead of attempting, our Interests to further,  
 You bring down, on our Heads, Perdition, and Murder. (pp. 11–12)

The delegate's wife also fears the establishment by Congress of the Courts of Inspection to monitor the embargo on trade with Britain and compares the Courts' role to the tyranny of an inquisition.<sup>26</sup> In her final words, which sum up the rhetoric of the piece as a whole, she exhorts her husband and other Patriots to show obedience to the British crown.

Make your Peace: – Fear the King: – The Parliament fear,  
 Oh! my Country! remember, that a Woman unknown,  
 Cry'd aloud, – like Cassandra, in Oracular Tone,  
 Repent! or you are forever, forever undone. (p. 14)

*The Debates at the Robin-Hood Society*, which lists 19 July 1774 as the date of the meeting, ridicules a local assembly where the Suffolk Resolves are also discussed and passed. Most of the participants in the debate are satirized as incompetent to deal with matters of state. They speak in exaggerated tones and bombastic phrases without understanding the meaning of the resolutions that they are debating. Mr. Silver Tongue, a Machiavellian Patriot who manipulates mass opinion, advises the moderator of the debate to humor them, “We must indulge these absurd Fellows for our own purposes” (p. 7). The piece ends with a serious note to the audience to retain their loyalty to the established government and to denounce the current rebellious actions of political figures who claim to represent their interests.

This deluded country has been too much the prey of artifice and faction. – The affairs of this immense continent are now arrived at a crisis, when they are no longer to be *sported with* – and the virtue and good sense of its inhabitants must be *rouzed* [*sic*] to vindicate that honour, which has been so greatly sullied by the insidious arts of its pretended friends. (p. 15)

Perhaps the prize for the Tory dramatic tract with the longest title goes to *The Americans Roused in a Cure for the Spleen; or, Amusement for a Winter's*