

ROYALL TYLER'S *THE CONTRAST*:
CHARACTERIZING "AMERICAN" LITERATURE

By

DEVIN EVANS

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, OK

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Abstract: Royall Tyler's comedy *The Contrast*, first performed on the boards of the John Street Theater in Lower Manhattan in 1787, illustrates the differences and mocks many of the manners of Americans and Europeans during the formative years of the early American republic. Following the American Revolution, writers began to develop a new identity, and Tyler, the first successful American dramatist, and his play capture its formative stages by showcasing the introduction of "American" characters and "American" settings to address contemporary issues for post-revolutionary citizens. Tyler's creation and use of character, context, and theatricality defines and illustrates the qualities of the emerging native tradition and helps establish the new nation's literary independence. *The Contrast* serves as an advocate for his audience to decide for themselves the manners, native-born or foreign, they wish to call "American" and to determine what new literary influences or traditions they will invent and adopt in the next century to usher in what will become known as "American" literature.

Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*: Characterizing "American" Literature

In 1787, the first American theatrical comedy *The Contrast* debuted at the John Street Theater in New York. Written by Royall Tyler, the Harvard-educated lawyer, farmer, and militia officer, the nation's first comedy explores the contrast between American sincerity and foreign insincerity as a method to define the "American way" of doing things. Influenced by the social and political atmosphere of the newly established country, Tyler captures the values of the developing nation by incorporating emerging ideas of the eighteenth century through a calculated form meant to entertain and educate citizens to the proper attitudes of Americans. Appearing on the stage in the first years of the nation's history and storytelling, *The Contrast* is the first of a series of works penned in the early republic to establish what would in the next century become known as "American" literature.

The original advertisement for *The Contrast* appealed to the nation's longing for its own literature and identity by crediting "A CITIZEN of the United States" as the playwright rather than Royall Tyler himself and, thus, emphasizing the significance of the work to American culture. By naming "A CITIZEN" instead of Tyler, the advertisement takes advantage of the nation's desire for a stronger sense of national culture, suggesting the playwright's talents were not as important as the playwright's nationality. Born in Boston, a hub of patriotic fervor, Tyler grew up in an atmosphere with roots in the epicenter of a nationalist awakening. Following the defeat of the British during the American Revolution, a desire to express one's independence from Europe influenced Tyler's *The Contrast*. In the only detailed study of Royall Tyler's life, Thomas Tanselle suggests there was "no more exciting place for a child to grown-up than in Boston's Ann Street of the 1760s."¹ Events such as the Stamp Act of 1765 and the Boston Massacre of 1770 signaled the beginning of the war towards American independence. As a result

of growing up in this patriotic atmosphere, Tyler was among the first of his fellow colonial scribes to use his American heritage as a basis for his writing. Born and raised in a household that promoted a departure from British control, he used his personal history as the framework for his works of literature to express his dedication towards his nation.² The advertisement advocated for the creation of a distinctive American culture appealing to patriots and nationalists. Crediting “A CITIZEN of the United States” in the promotions for *The Contrast* captures the cultural expectations of nationalism held by citizens towards the United States. Audiences wanted to see natural authors write American literature using distinctly American characters and settings to explore issues of political and cultural significance to post-revolutionary Americans.

1. Creating an American Character

The lure of seeing the first American comedy written by an American author and performed by an American company promised audiences a work detailing the American experience. Tyler uses American characters in an American setting to encourage discourse on the manners, morals, and attitudes of the new nation; using these American elements amplifies the distinctions between the United States and Europe and illustrates essential qualities of the expectations of republicanism such as a loyalty to self and nation rather than allegiance to other countries. By constructing an American drama focusing on American concerns, Tyler maintains America’s cultural significance through a depiction of a national identity not yet established in 1787. Following the separation of America from British rule, the first generation of Americans needed to establish a strong foundation of values and duties for the following generations to develop. In recent critic Thomas Cochran’s *Challenges to American Values*, a collection of challenges faced by Americans after gaining independence, he describes these same possibilities

and expectations presented to Americans. Cochran argues “[c]itizens confidently expected great and beneficial changes resulting from the first large society growing under conditions new to the history of the world.”³ Citizens were not required to follow the old order and traditions set by aristocratic England; instead, they could inaugurate a system embodying American values of independence and equality by representing their own ideas rather than replicating the traditions of other nations.

The “Prologue” of *The Contrast* begins with the author calling “EXULT, each patriot heart—this night is shewn / A piece which we may fairly call our own.”⁴ By depicting “pictures not from foreign climes” (7), Tyler proclaims his work belongs to America because it features American issues and characters supporting the endeavors of the republic and verifying the legitimacy of the new nation. The “target youths” (7) Tyler addresses are, like himself, the first generation of Americans to be born and come to adulthood in America. While a comedy, the purpose of *The Contrast* is clearly more educational than aesthetic:

Should rigid critics reprobate our play,
At least the patriotic heart will say,
“Glorious our fall since a noble cause.
The bold *attempt alone* demands applause.” (8)

The prologue addresses the uncertain tone of post-revolutionary America because of the lack of an established identity of the nation. While admitting it may be “[s]trange” for Americans to reject their “native worth” to “check the progress of [America’s] rising fame,” Tyler suggests Americans “[l]et [their] own Bards be proud to copy [them]!” (7). Through Manly, the plays hero, Jonathan, his manservant, and Maria, their sensible female friend, Tyler encourages the embrace of “homespun habits” instead of “[t]he fashions and follies of the times” (7). Using characters who embody specific ideas “points the way” (7) for citizens regarding the attitudes they should respect. Tyler provides his like-minded Americans with a work manifesting their

ideas while also promoting thoughtful discourse on significant issues to post-revolutionary Americans.

For example, Colonel Manly, Tyler's representation of American virtue, often contemplates the expectations and defining position of American citizens described by Cochran. Manly engages in didactic, and often comic, monologues regarding the correct conduct and moral obligations of Americans towards their own country:

Yes, Sir; and we, her children, should blush for them in private and endeavour, as individuals to reform them. But, if our country has its errors in common with other countries, I am proud to say America— I mean the United States—has displayed virtues and achievements which modern nations may admire, but of which they have seldom set us the example. (46)

By operating as the spokesperson for the pride first-generation Americans ought to feel towards their country, Manly emphasizes America's accomplishments as its own rather than crediting inspirations of other nations to promote the United States as an influential nation distinct from other nations. Like other newly-minted Americans of the time, Tyler longed for the recognition of his nation's accomplishments, inspiring him to craft a play capturing the attitudes and potential of the United States. Colonel Manly's reserved patriotism exemplifies these feelings of nationalism and pride for American achievements branching from the founding generation of Americans. Because of Manly's devotion to America, he resists looking towards what Dimple, the Europeanized American who despises his own country, describes as "the brilliant exhibitions of Europe" because he "can never esteem that knowledge valuable which tends to give [him] a distaste for [his] native country" (45). Tyler's American hero represents the determining position of the post-revolution generation of Americans who could either continue to look towards Europe for guidance or could attempt something better suited to their needs.

The eventual marriage between Maria and Manly and her rejection of Dimple suggests the triumph of loyalty to authentic American manners over adopted British ideals; however, their

union does not completely condemn the attitudes of the two socialites Charlotte and Letitia who embrace foreign fashions and follies. The transformation of Charlotte, Manly's sister, from a "foolish coquette" (52) into a woman who despises the "littleness of her past conduct" (57) conveys Tyler's comic warning against superficiality without condemning women as a whole, suggesting he values women as a vital aspect of developing American culture. The female characters represent concerns towards the behaviors and roles of women in an American republic. *The Contrast* showcases anxieties towards shifting roles of women following the Revolution by contrasting sensible Maria and insensible Charlotte as representatives of American virtue. As explained by Donald Siebert in "Royall Tyler's 'Bold Example': *The Contrast* and the English Comedy," Tyler comically presents "a likable character who gets herself in trouble by her libertine airs."⁵ Tyler's gentle satire of his character's attitudes never condemns them completely; except for the villainous Dimple, conveying as long as a character embraces their Americanisms, they are redeemable despite their foibles.

The opening prologue of *The Contrast* encourages a shift away from a British influence towards the development of American traditions by emphasizing the American qualities of its characters and setting. Tyler comically sets "virtuous" Coronel Manly and his Yankee "waiter" Jonathan against the anglicized seducer Billy Dimple and his servant Jessamy. The play's villain, Dimple, an embodiment but not a necessarily enlightened idea of aristocratic sophistication and immorality, plots to cast away his sentimental fiancé Maria for Letitia, the wealthy heiress and Charlotte's friend, all while keeping Charlotte as his mistress. The three female characters of the play capture the stereotypes and expectations held towards women in the late 1700s. Following the Revolution, it became more important for women to demonstrate intelligence and self-discipline as a means to instill republican ideals in future generations of Americans because

family life brought benefits to the country. Abigail Adams famously told her husband to “remember the ladies” when writing the Constitution, conveying the increasing involvement of women in the development of America. Maria reflects traditional, obedient women committed to her husband as well as to her country. Although they embrace frivolous fashions, Charlotte and Letitia epitomize an unorthodox and independence of spirit reflecting self-government valued by Americans. Each woman within *The Contrast* pursues her own path towards fulfillment; however, Maria’s desire to marry for love and duty to America offers a more commendable resolve.

The Contrast further addresses issues involving questions of identity debated by Americans in the post-revolutionary years. Tyler invents stock characters with features familiar to his audience to delicately maintain an appreciation for the social expectations set up by the English while questioning the effects of preserving these attitudes in America following the revolution. Dimple behaves as a deceiving seducer whose inclination for vice comes from his admiration of English manners, and Charlotte and Letitia, too, act as gossiping coquettes entranced by the allure of British manners. Maria and Manly, the play’s sentimentalists, devote themselves to correct behaviors according to tradition, often at the expense of their own happiness. Maria and Manly’s initial abstention from pursuing their feelings towards one another comes from their devotion to the social order of honoring the fatherly authority of Van Rough. The secondary characters made up of the servants of Dimple, Manly, and Maria offer a trivialized courtship plot reflecting the play’s main plot involving the servant’s masters. Jessamy, who emulates Dimple’s playboy habits, cites European works as the model for his character. Jessamy with Jenny, Maria’s maid, taunts the naive and “true blue son of liberty” (25) Jonathan by misleading him in social practices such as his attempts to woo Jenny with unprompted bows

and busses. Their schemes backfire emphasizing the success of honesty while condemning snobbish falsities.

Tyler's audiences could clearly see the similarities between themselves and the characters brought to life on the stage. His "modern youths" (7) maneuver their way through the New York society Richard Pressman describes. Pressman describes Tyler's writing of *The Contrast* as a "disruption, conflict, experimentation, and astounding accomplishment" ⁶ following the Revolution because of the social and political environment surrounding the play's creation. Placing archetypal characters in New York City offers the audience a broad range of laughable individuals such as Miss Wasp, the gossip with stinging quips; Mr. Van Cash, the money lender to whom Dimple is indebted; and John Hazard, the threatening debt collector. Tyler's use of ridiculous names as a comedic device to strategically represent Americans of varied social classes ensures the play's message reaches across divides such as wealth and class. Humorously exploring the courtship drama with two sets of characters, one wealthy and one working class, suggests the manners performed are not exclusive to a single group of people; instead, they ought to be practiced by all Americans. By focusing *The Contrast* on these stock figures, Tyler exhibits the uncertain atmosphere of America following the Revolution as citizens struggled to define the attributes of the United States.

2. *The Contrast in a Contemporary Cultural Context*

Using characters as representatives of virtue and vice educates Tyler's audience on the proper conduct of the new nation; however, by approaching his moral instruction with "aims not to expose [America's flaws], but amend [them]" (7), Tyler creates a piece of literature encouraging national moral development and stimulating patriotism. The ponderings of the

differences between European vice and American virtue offers a consolidation of republic ideals and contemporary issues for post-revolutionary Americans. Tyler most heavily criticizes imitation, especially imitation of European manners demonstrated through Dimple and Jessamy. The pair of Anglophiles' discipleship to the controversial advice of Lord Chesterfield, a British diplomat most famous for letters written to his son offering advice on gentlemanly behavior, clearly presents their character flaws. For example, Dimple, inspired by his reading of Chesterfield, brags about deceiving "a lovely girl who believes every tittle of what you say to be serious!" (40); Manly, however, finds Dimple's deceit "more detestable than a common robber" (40). The ultimate revelation of Dimple's womanizing and deceitful nature conveys the eventual failure destined to come from imitating behaviors rather than acting authentically.

In 1787, the letters of Lord Chesterfield were widely popular, and Tyler critiques the act of imitation through Dimple's and Jessamy's adherence to Chesterfield's advice. In a collection of Lord Chesterfield's letters, Christopher Mayo describes his *Letters* as the "peak of genteel elegance" for some, but for others, Chesterfield's suggested manners "signaled the nadir of social decay."⁷ Chesterfield's letters encourage a sculpted insincerity that twists politeness for personal gain. Including his works captures the concerns many early Americans held towards the motivations and manners of their citizens. Literary scholar Robert E. Kelly describes Chesterfield as "reproached as a man without allegiance to virtue, truth, religion, and morality."⁸ Contemporaries of Chesterfield such as America's first female playwright Mercy Otis Warren cautioned young men on the dangers of mimicking Chesterfield's moral instructions:

This masterly writer has furnished the present generation with a code of politeness, which, perhaps, surpasses any thing of the kind in the English language. But when he sacrifices truth to convenience, probity to pleasure, virtue to the graces, generosity, gratitude, and all the finer feelings of the soul, to a momentary gratification, we cannot but pity the man, as much as we admire the author; and I never see this fascinating collection of letters, taken up by the youthful reader, but I tremble, lest the honey'd

poison, that lurks beneath the fairest flowers of fancy and Rhetoric, should leave a deeper tincture on the mind, than, even his documents for an external decency and the semblance of Morality.⁹

Clearly, the moral implications of Chesterfield's letters upset early Americans. Tyler utilizes Dimple as a representative of the fashionable, disingenuous social behaviors encouraged by Lord Chesterfield. In Europe, Dimple “learn[ed] to despise the amusements of this country” (45) and in America attempts to imitate the behaviors of Englishmen based on his distorted view gathered from reading their works.¹⁰ By embracing foreign influences, Dimple and Jessamy capture the moral failings of imitation by rejecting American virtues of honesty and hard work. By creating a villain who had fallen victim to the ill advice of foreign lords, making him a comedic antagonist in contrast to morally upright Colonel Manly, Tyler includes this contemporary issue conveying his intention for *The Contrast* to gently alter the tendency of early Americans to adopt European characteristics.

Tyler critiques inauthentic and self-motivated social practices by opposing practical, patriotic Americans with British-influenced characters. The first meeting between Jonathan and Jessamy foreshadows the inevitable contrast between their respective employers, Manly and Dimple. For example, Jessamy takes advantage of Jonathan’s poor etiquette, offering the English Lord Chesterfield's letters as a guide to maneuvering society as he encourages Jonathan to pursue Maria’s maid, Jenny. The servant’s story of *The Contrast* offers a less drastic and more comical portrayal of the consequences of insincerity. Jonathan, following Jessamy’s malicious advice, attempts to woo Jenny with “[s]ix elegant bows” and talk of “hearts, darts, flames, nectar and ambrosia—the more incoherent the better” (28-29); instead, he makes a fool of himself. Tyler further satirizes Jessamy’s measured insincerity through discussions of theater. Jessamy explains his attempts to comprise “every possible display of jocularit[y]” (50) by planning the appropriate

type and timing of laughter when listening to a piece of literature. Jessamy's critique of Jonathan's natural, emotional responses highlights his artificial approach to social behavior. Dimple's review of his experiences at the American theater certainly captures his performative social behaviors:

I sat with my back to the stage all the time, admiring a much better actress than any there—a lady who played the fine woman to perfection; through, by the laugh of the horrid creatures around me, I suppose it was a comedy. (45)

Dimple clearly views social roles as a more superior form of performance than the professional acting, emphasizing the erroneousness of British-imitation. Dimple's imitative nature conflicts with the American value of freedom; his lack of virtue beyond possessing "a polished exterior" (17) reflects his refusal to think independently. This approach of contrasting characters by their behaviors exhibits Tyler's encouragement of America embracing its own culture instead of substituting ingenuity for honesty.

Similarly, good-natured Jonathan, the self-proclaimed "true blue son of liberty" (25), often makes a fool of himself because of his naiveté. While liked by the audience for his innocence, the characters often manipulate him, making him ill-suited for imitation. Siebert asserts that "[w]e may like Brother Jonathan because he always means well, and he does serve as a catalyst for satirical revelation, but we still laugh at his utter naiveté."¹¹ The satirical revelation, of course, acknowledges the impracticality of the ideals of republicanism embraced by early Americans. Jonathan, often regarded as "a significant creation of the Yankee type,"¹² embraces the concept of equality without grasping the differences between his status and Colonel Manly's position. He rejects the title "servant" (26) and favors "waiter" which, in the context of the conversation with Jessamy, highlights his idealized vision of his place in society. Jessamy laughs at Jonathan's simpleton nature and "Yankee distinctions" (26) because Jessamy

is not so shielded to believe Jonathan as his master's equivalent. Despite their different class positions and titles, Jonathan views his Manly as his equal; however, he still adheres to Manly's ideas on political matters. Jonathan's adoption of Colonel Manly's views towards Shays' Rebellion captures Jonathan's undesirable habit of accepting others opinions over his own.

Discussing Shays' Rebellion within the play also provides a context for *The Contrast* by establishing an atmosphere for original audiences to help them interpret the play. Tyler's involvement with Shays' Rebellion, the first post-independence uprising in beginning in 1786, resulted in his leading negotiations with upset farmers who opposed state tax policies that resulted in economic hardships on veterans of the Revolution. The playwright's eloquent manner of speech assisted in calming the rebels, leading to the eventual victory of the United States government and the establishment of a more centralized government in America. Tyler's role in Shays' Rebellion was successful and clearly affected his opinions towards the future of his country. Another important influence for *The Contrast* is Tyler's attendance of a performance of *The School of Scandal* while in New York aftermath of the rebellion. Pressman notes that "within the three-month span between the effective end of [Shays'] Rebellion in February and the beginning of the Constitutional Convention in May, [*The Contrast*] also takes place precisely between these two events—nor could it take place at any other time."¹³ Jonathan's political opinions mirror those of his employer Manly. While Jonathan believes "the sturgeons were right" (26), he publicly shares Colonel Manly's critical view:

Colonel said that it was a burning shame for the true blue Bunker Hill sons of liberty, who had fought Governor Hutchinson, Lord North, and the Devil, to have any hand in kicking up a cursed dust against a government which we had, every mother's son of us, a hand in making. (26)

Shays' Rebellion tested the strength of the United States government and challenged the unity of the citizens. The specifically American context in which Tyler constructs his work challenges the

values and mindset of Americans. Jonathan proclaims “no man shall master [him]” (25); however, in practice, he serves Manly and accepts his master’s political views instead of promoting his own. Tyler’s depiction of republican ideals suggests Tyler satirizes Dimple’s and Jessamy’s performance of inauthentic morals, as well as the idealized republican manners embodied by Manly and Jonathan.

3. Tyler’s Transformative Theatricality

Setting the play in New York City introduces a post-revolution America where citizens face defining decisions affecting the progress of the United States, such as the power structure of their government and the authority their representatives should possess. In the years following the Revolution’s end in 1783, America moved into an experimental age which tested new political structures and reorganized social classes to oppose the aristocratic standards set up by British society. Tyler captures the complicated social environment of the country through Jonathan’s experiences with the playhouse. Tyler’s own history with the theater was complicated as the theater was outlawed in America following the 1774 Continental Congress, prohibiting plays and public entertainment because of the impending Revolution, until 1793 when the government sanctions on-stage performances were reduced.¹⁴ Tanselle’s critique of Tyler’s dramatic technique as “reminiscent of eighteenth-century British drama, with its hypocritical rake, gossiping young ladies, and domineering parent” reflects Tyler’s exposure and dedication to the dramatic form during his writing of *The Contrast* as he draws on elements of eighteenth-century British theater.¹⁵

Accounts of Tyler's viewing a 1787 performance in New York of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School of Scandal* are often considered his first exposure to the theatrical world;

however, Siebert claims this belief is rooted in falsehood as Tyler's distinguished Harvard education and his enterprising family background suggest he was "no doubt quite familiar with the principal works of the English stage" because of his intellectual achievements; clearly Tyler knew notable literary works including dramas.¹⁶ Tyler's characters discuss Sheridan's *The School of Scandal*¹⁷ or, as Jonathan dubs it, the "School for Scandalization" (35); Tyler's ironic incorporation of the inspiration for *The Contrast* within the play tests his audience's ability to recognize the irony of their viewing of *The Contrast* which utilizes English tradition as a model. Tyler accomplishes his broader aim, discouraging imitation as the basis for manners, by forcing the audience to see themselves as the characters of the play see theater-goers, as those individuals who entertain "the vanities of the world" within "the devil's drawing room" (33). Tyler uses popular British drama of the period to promote further discourse on the reliance of relying on European tradition as well as the importance of America forming a tradition of its own.

Siebert continues his argument by suggesting the play's "independence of tradition" comes from the Americanization of the English theater tradition. And Tanselle reasons Tyler's audience fell "comfortably within the familiar English tradition," although *The Contrast* "is limited and dated most by the very elements borrowed or imitated rather stiffly from the British tradition."¹⁸ Tyler's use of inherited tradition from the English theater challenges the expectations of audiences as well as reinforces the disapproval of affectation of insincere manners. At the end of the 1700s, Americans still relied on Europe to provide entertainment. In *Performing Patriotism*, a catalog of the development of American theater, Jason Shaffer explains that "nowhere was the continuing British literary dominance of the United States more obvious than in the theatre."¹⁹ British plays following the romances and superficiality of the upper class

dominated the early American stage. However, Tyler both resists the British theater traditions of class distinctions and embraces it as a way to instill the value of American virtue in his audience.

Despite the imitative nature of Tyler's work, his usage of American characters, setting, and contemporary themes within the European theater framework signals an important step forward for the development of American theater. Following the Revolution, Americans challenged the traditional order of authority by creating their own system of government. America demanded the exploration of American ideas such as liberty and independence through domestic materials with the purpose of creating works that match these emerging American values. Tyler presents this challenge through Maria's love towards Manly while engaged to Dimple. Sentimental Maria reads novels inclining her to marry a man of virtue; however, she refuses to disobey her father's intentions, choosing to "give [her] hand without her heart" to Dimple (49). The pairs' devotion to "duty" (49) reflects the challenges of embracing emerging ideas while respecting tradition. American revolutionaries had challenged traditional authorities, Maria's ideas for the duties of her spouse differed from those of her father capturing the changing social order following the Revolution. The playwright's synthesis of American characters with an American setting paints a portrait of American society which operates as a method of examination of contemporary America in the 1780s. Although Tyler mimicked Sheridan's approach of exaggeration and juxtaposition of different characters to promote change, he tailored *The Contrast* to an American audience placing the audience in a mindset determined to cultivate traditions of their own.

Under a republican form of government, United States citizens could devote themselves to their own self-determination and self-interest; however, Tyler's depiction of republican virtues suggests the real application of virtues such as independence, equality, and directness cannot

meet the idealized expectations of citizens because the complete embodiment these ethics is too inflexible. Jessamy's and Dimple's devotion to maintaining an air of gentlemanliness contrasts with the proudly patriotic Jonathan and Manly, who are often equally ridiculous in their devotion to behaving like Americans. Tyler balances his gentle satire of Manly, Maria, and Jonathan, examples of admirable characters, with the commendable manners of Americans without ignoring the flaws of the nation. Charlotte points out in her critique of her brother:

My brother is the very counterpart and reverse of me: I am gay, he is grave; I am airy, he is solid; I am ever selecting the most pleasing objects for my laughter, he has a tear for every pitiful one. And thus whilst he is plucking the briars and thorns from the path of the unfortunate, I am stewing my own path with roses. (19)

Manly possesses "antiquated, anti-gallant notions" (19) of behavior when compared to the fashionable society men. While honorable, Manly remains quite stiff in his critiques of society. He acknowledges America's faults while insisting citizens "should blush for them in private, and endeavor, as individuals, to reform them" (46), and his simple sensibilities cause him to demonstrate a rather naive outlook toward society. Although Manly is not as naive as his waiter Johnathan, his American innocence forces him to maintain a rather old-fashioned ideology, distorting his perception of reality.

For example, during Manly's first interaction with his sister, he critiques Charlotte's quibbling over fashions by emphasizing the moral characteristics his unfashionable coat suggests:

I can only say, sister, that there was a time when this coat was respectable, and some people even thought that those men who had endured so many winter campaigns in the service of their country, without bread, clothing, or pay, at least deserved that the poverty of their appearance should not be ridiculed. (23)

In following the behavior of her British friends, Charlotte understands and indulges in society's games while Manly abstains to preserve his simple and straightforward approach to life:

We agree in opinion entirely, brother, though it would not have done for me to have said it: it is the coat makes the man respectable. In the time of war, when we were almost frightened to death, why, your coat was respectable that is fashionable; now another kind of coat is fashionable, that is respectable. (23)

While Tyler uses Manly and Jonathan's simplicity to make fun of American naiveté, he still portrays them as laudable characters for their love of their country. Tyler exaggerates these characters by equating virtue with Americanisms, painting an idealized picture of nationalism in America following the revolution. Manly never allows the characters or the audience to forget Americans must be proud of their country, expounding on the "common good" which is "lost in the pursuit of private interest" (39); however, his extreme patriotic values are humorous as he appears stiff and unaware of the *real* opinions of society outside of his *idealized* expectations for his country.

By satirizing the moral messengers of the play, Tyler exposes the problems of prescribing specific manners and morals to a nation made up of many kinds of people from different classes and backgrounds. Tyler satirizes the play's patriotic examples by pairing them with equally ridiculous English-imitators. For instance, Maria's sentimental nature is just as rooted in the ideas of English authors as Charlotte's coquettish nature. After reading sentimental authors, Maria finds the "[t]he contrasts was so striking betwixt the good sense of her books and the flimsiness of her love-letters" (11). Maria's and Charlotte's behaviors are both influenced by the novel and maintain a certain level of impracticality when embraced in the real world. Yankee Jonathan and servant Jessamy both adhere to their master's manners. Manly carries the patriotic weight of the play, but Tyler satirizes and exposes his high moral character to the same degree as he mocks Dimple's lack of moral integrity emphasizing the ridiculous practice of imitation. Tyler carefully approaches his gentle method of satire by calling on the "wisdom of the Comic Muse / Exalt your merits, or your faults accuse. / But think not, 't is her aim to be server" (8).

Tyler's critique of imitation in all areas of behavior from Dimple's blatant adoption of Chesterfield's concept of a gentleman to Manly's blinding American ideals emphasizes the playwright's distaste for imitation even in regards to admirable qualities such as Manly's love for his country. Through Jonathan and Jessamy, Tyler addresses the issues of imitating both commendable qualities and contemptible qualities as both characters problematically imitate their master's actions. Jessamy's belief that natural emotions "are regulated by art" and have been compiled in a "pretty gamut" (50) composed by Dimple. As Jonathan and Jessamy discuss Jonathan's failure to win over Maria's maid Jenny, Tyler exposes the failings of their imitative nature suggesting he recommends neither Manly's pensive disposition nor Dimple's dandified demeanor. Instead, Tyler ridicules both extremes insisting upon the superiority of authentic behaviors that come from the individual rather than reproduction.

The success of Tyler's production of an American play with distinctly American qualities comes from his use of comedy to ironically address the audience. Tyler does this most obviously through Jonathan's comments on the playhouse, or as he calls it "the devil's drawing-room" (33). Jonathan boldly claims: "Oh! No, no, no! You won't catch me at a play-house, I warrant you" (33); however, within the narrative, Jonathan is already in *The Contrast* as an actor on the stage. Similarly, when Charlotte describes popular playhouse etiquette as "the sentimental charms of a side-box conversation!" (23), the audience sees in themselves the same superiority Charlotte feels from attending the theater. The ironic address of the audience warns the viewers not to be too harsh in their judgment of the characters promoting self-examination and supporting the practice of authenticity over imitation. Tyler's approach to critiquing the audience liberates American theater from the constraints of the English tradition as he synthesizes British traditions with American values to offer an examination of American culture. Through an inspection of

Tyler's approach to didactic satire, *The Contrast* reveals the ongoing discussion of contemporary issues for post-revolutionaries towards the proper native manners with the broad attempt to define social and cultural features of a specific American nation.

4. Conclusions

Pressman ponders Tyler's complex approach to satire by asking: "How is it possible, then, that characters can be ridiculed and yet carry the moral weight of the play?"²⁰ While Tyler exaggerates both the play's heroes and villains, he makes sure the good-natured manners of the heroes surpass their flaws. Their American qualities endear them to the audience. The American manners and values of Manly, Jonathan, and Maria reflect the traits Americans desired from their country. Manly is simple but noble and patriotic; Maria is overly sentimental but remains steadfast to her morals even when they conflict with her happiness; Jonathan acts like a fool, but even in 1787 critics recognized "an incessant zeal for moral excellence was his ruling passion"²¹ counteracting his buffoonery. Tyler's creation of these characters captures the worth of their American qualities. The American-ness of Manly, Maria, and Jonathan make them morally superior and admired despite their flaws; while Dimple and Jessamy expose the consequences of imitating something false to their nature. As the "Prologue" proclaims, "On Native themes his Muse displays her pow'rs; / If ours the faults, the virtues too are ours" (7). Tyler's calculated character crafting resists the proud proclamation of all things American, even the faults of the nation, as a method of promoting the development of American culture. The ultimate success of Manly's stark American idealism, despite Tyler's comic portrayal of the character's ideals, mirrors the intent of *The Contrast*. Manly remedies the uncertainty of new republican ideas through his assuredness and steadfastness of character embodying manners early American's

idolized. *The Contrast* reveals the contrasts between Americans who behave as themselves and those who act like something they are not. Through his renovations of European theater traditions, Tyler reminds his audience that the play and the play's meaning involves them. A play written by an American for Americans and set in America qualifies as a native work; however, *The Contrast* possesses qualities of the emerging native tradition including character and theme establishing a movement towards literary independence. Tyler's significant ambitions through *The Contrast* advocate for his audience to decide for themselves the manners that are American rather than rely on foreign influences or traditions.

Notes

1. Tanselle, G. Thomas. *Royall Tyler*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
2. Tyler's other works include *The Algerine Captive* (1797), one of America's first novels, a fictitious memoir about exploring the significance of American freedom by opposing Algerines, who take the protagonist Updike Underhill, against America. Through his time in captivity, Underhill develops his identity as an American. Tyler's writings operate as political commentary encouraging the unification and fortification of American government.
3. Cochran, Thomas C. *Challenges to American Values: Society, Business, and Religion*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
4. Tyler, Royall, *The Contrast*. In *Early American Drama*, edited by Jeffrey H. Richards, 7. New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1997. Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
5. Siebert, Donald T. "Royall Tyler's "Bold Example": *The Contrast* and the English Comedy of Manners." *Early American Literature* 13, no. 1 (1978): 7.
6. Pressman, Richard S. "Class Positioning and Shays' Rebellion: Resolving the Contradictions of *The Contrast*." *Early American Literature* 21, no. 2 (1986): 87.
7. Mayo, Christopher. "Manners and Manuscript: The Editorial Manufacture of Lord Chesterfield in Letters to His Son." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 99, no.1 (2005): 38. Christopher Mayo is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Macalester College. His multi-volume *Cambridge Edition of Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son* (2004) compiles the letters of Lord Chesterfield
8. Hayley, William. *Two Dialogues Containing a Comparative View of the Lives, Characters, and Writings, of Philip, the Late Earl of Chesterfield, and of Dr. Samuel Johnson*. London: T. Cadell, 1787.
9. Hayes, Edmund M. "Mercy Otis Warren versus Lord Chesterfield 1779." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1983): 616-21. Mercy Otis Warren is an American poet, dramatist, and historian closely involved with prominent Revolutionary leaders. She is often regarded as the first American women writer to write addressing the public rather than for her own private purposes. Hayes transcribes Warren's letter to her son, originally published in *The Independent Chronicle* (1781), *Boston Magazine* (1784), and *Massachusetts Magazine* (1790) placing her work into the historical context of its time.
10. Ibid., 30-32. In Act III Scene I, Dimple references the works of several English essayists, novelists, and poets such as Mary Wortley Montague and John Milton.
11. Siebert, "Royall Tyler's 'Bold Example,'" 4.
12. Ibid., 3.

13. Ibid., 89.

14. Goodell, W., and American Abolition Society. *Our National Charters, for the Millions: I. The Federal Constitution of 1788-9, II. the Articles of Confederation, 1778, III. the Declaration of Independence, 1776, IV. The Articles of Association, 1774 : With Notes, Showing Their Bearing on Slavery, and the Relative Powers of the State and National Governments*. New-York: American Abolition Society, 1858. The Articles of Association documents the clauses and regulations laid forth by the 1774 Continental Congress. The eighth clause lays forth the limitations regarding public performances: “We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry, and promote agriculture, arts and the manufacturer of this country, especially that of wool; and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of games, cock fighting, exhibitions of shrews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments; and on the death of any relation or friend, none of us, or any of our families will go into any further mourning-dress, than a black crepe or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen, and a black ribbon and necklace for ladies, and we will discontinue the giving of gloves and scarves at funerals.”

15. Ibid., 59.

16. Ibid., 3.

17. Similar to Tyler, Sheridan’s *School of Scandal* (1777) explores the dangers of gossip and deceit. Marriage opportunities and fortune hunting drive the development of the themes of the play. Characters of *The School of Scandal* function as symbols of various virtues and manners. Sheridan satirizes the scandals and greediness of British upper class suggesting the dangers of this behavior. Tyler uses Sheridan’s approach of exaggerating and juxtaposing various characters to call for social change.

18. Ibid., 72,77.

19. Shaffer, Jason. *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater*. Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, p. 170.

20. Ibid., 88.

21. Ibid., 14.