All the World's a Political Stage: How a Monopoly on American Theatre Shaped the New World's Political and Cultural Identity

All the World's a Political Stage: How a Monopoly on American Theatre Shaped the New World's Political and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The American Company, run by the Hallam family and David Douglass, was the first professional theatre troupe to establish in America from London, and held a de facto monopoly on professional theatre in the colonies from 1752-1790. While theatre scholars have unearthed the company's origin story, there has yet to be a scholarly discussion regarding the intentions and consequences behind specific plays the company produced. Was the Hallam family sympathetic to the revolution? Did their political opinions affect the choices made about which plays to produce? What impact did these plays have on the values of a new and developing nation and its leaders?

This thesis theorizes that the Hallam family was sympathetic to the revolutionary cause, a theory that will be proven by examining relevant political themes in seven plays they debuted in the colonies: *Cato, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, The Wonder, Julius Caesar, The Prince of Parthia,* and *The Padlock*. Its findings include the fact that many of the plays produced by the American Company were thematically political—for example, nine of the twelve Shakespeare plays selected held clear anti-crown sentiments, with plotlines surrounding the downfall of monarchy or the dangers of tyrannical leadership. In addition, the company was the first to put on an American-born playwright's work—that also harbored anti-Britain themes—and produce controversial plays featuring blatant racial commentary and female leads breaking from traditional domestic expectations.

Chapter one provides a comprehensive summary of existing scholarly conversations on American theatre, as well as the historical context necessary to understand the significance of the American Company's monopoly. Chapter two analyzes *Cato, Julius Caesar*, and *The Prince of Parthia* as propagandistic plays with revolutionary messaging. Chapter three explores the origination of minstrelsy and racial prejudice in American theatre through *Othello* and *The Padlock*, and how race was negatively associated with the British government. Chapter three also analyzes the development of rule-shattering gender roles in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Wonder*, symbolizing the rise of independence and rebellion in the New World. This thesis concludes that the choices of plays—and the American Company's interpretations of them—implied the Hallam family's pro-revolutionary stance, influenced the socio-political attitudes of their colonial audiences, and is an exemplary lesson in the propagandistic powers of artistic monopolies on theatre then and today.

Frontispiece

Collection of Early American Colonial Theatre Playbills

Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society

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Dedication

To Dad. My éminence grise.

Acknowledgments

It is with heartfelt gratitude and admiration that I pen this acknowledgment to my advisor and beloved teacher, Remo Airaldi. Remo's knowledge of theatre—acting, directing, and Shakespeare—is the sun: radiant and life-giving. His gift for teaching such a delicate craft is the galaxy: a limitless space for stars to grow. The profound impact his mentorship has made on my life and academic journey extends beyond this thesis. I had been fortunate to attend his highly regarded classes at Harvard over the years, and each semester walked away with a full heart, a revived curiosity, and a tender understanding of what Anatole France once said, that "nine-tenths of education is encouragement." The expansion of the spirit cannot be measured. But my spirit, my urgency, my love to perform—to awaken the quiet words that gently sleep within us all—has been set aflame by the glow of Remo's faith that I had the voice to do it. For the irreplicable gift that he is, I will always be grateful.

I am indebted to Dr. Richard Martin for his care, patience, and guidance as I took on this thesis under strenuous circumstances and in a limited timeframe. His kindness has always been so transparent, and his humor and care put me at ease during the difficult moments of this project. I know from his help and from countless fellow students who sing his praises, that he has been an invaluable beacon of light in the Harvard community, and I am so glad my academic journey crossed paths with his time here.

I am also deeply thankful to library miracle worker Steve Kuehler, whose unbridled delight for digging the gold mines of theater history was truly contagious.

I would never have been honored by this education without the love and support of my family. The lottery-like odds of my fortune do not escape me, and my gratitude for my tiny, lucky spot in the universe humbles me daily. And so, to my renaissance man of a father, I tip my tri-cornered hat. Always ready to light dynamite and fly, he has been the P.T. Barnum, Samuel Adams, and Caractacus Potts of my heart and mind's revolutions. When I sing, I sing for my lovely Omma and Emo. Two exquisite portraits of grace and goodwill, they have tenderly nurtured a lifetime's garden of courage and confidence that I visit every day and make wishes to every night. I am ever grateful to my soul's sister, Jessibel Falcon, whose angelic strength rejuvenated my own in these past few months. And finally, to my brother, Baron, whose daily musings on muffins and the meaning of life kept me from academic insanity in the wee small hours of the morning.

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Introduction

Lewis Hallam Jr. was eleven years old in May of 1752 when he boarded *The Charming Sally*, a London ship headed to America with his parents, two sisters, and a motley crew of twelve hungry actors. Little did the boy know, as he watched London and its thriving theatre scene fade into the distance, that he would in forty years be celebrated as the New World's leading Shakespeare interpreter and key creator of a thriving theatre scene in post-revolutionary America. He had watched his father and uncle, bankrupt business partners Lewis and William Hallam, struggle as actors and theatre managers and fail due to measly crowds in the second-rate theatres of London. Their main struggle was that England's theatre scene was growing increasingly competitive despite the British government's attempts to censor and monopolize the industry (Crean 239). Thus, with little money but much hope for success in the uncharted territories of theatre in America, Lewis Hallam Sr. gathered his wife, three children, and acting crew, and sailed to the colonies. This decision to tread new territory would significantly influence the fate of America's theatre scene for years to come.

During their six-week journey, Lewis Hallam Sr. gathered his actors, eight men and four women, to rehearse the plays they would soon debut for American audiences. The first play they prepared, *The Merchant of Venice*, was premiered to an audience of curious sailors onboard. Hallam Sr., a shrewd businessman and quick-tempered director, held high performance standards that earned him and his "Company of Comedians from London"—later renamed the "The American Company" (Conway 27)—the reputation for

being the first professionals to grace the colonies. The company landed in Yorktown, Virginia six weeks after setting sail, and Hallam Sr. immediately led his troupe to Williamsburg, Virginia, knowing of its open-minded attitude toward theatre as opposed to other cities in the colonies that held strict religious convictions. Hallam convinced fellow Englishman Governor Robert Dinwiddie to inaugurate the first professional theatre building—a repurposed storehouse—and on September 15, 1752, the American Company performed *The Merchant of Venice* to an effusive audience (Friedman 18). In 1755, three years after landing, the company set sail for Kingston, Jamaica, to escape political tensions and to join forces with what was becoming a flourishing theatre scene. There, Lewis Hallam met David Douglass, an actor at the helm of his own professional company, and the two managers merged companies. Soon after, Lewis Hallam Sr. passed away, and Douglass married Hallam's widow and assumed leadership of the American Company along with help of his new stepson Lewis Hallam Jr. (Durham 15-23).

Douglass and Hallam Jr. maintained the company throughout the revolution, and Hallam Jr. became credited for being "the first to present Shakespeare to the new world," casting himself as "Hamlet" and "Othello"—controversially portraying "the negro character from observation" (Hopkinson 6). Being the first to bring Shakespeare to the colonies also meant that audiences were left to view Lewis Hallam Jr.'s interpretation of these Shakespearean plays without opportunity for critical comparison. Word of the American Company's talent and quality spread fast, audiences filled their theatres, and in little time a de facto monopoly on professional theatre—and subjective interpretations of race, class, and Shakespeare—was established.

But the American Company's success in the colonies was not earned without first facing hurdles of disinterest, fear, class divide, bureaucracy, and religious authority. For years, the presence of theatre in the colonies had been sparse. Theatre was not a common form of entertainment. Religious authorities considered theatrical entertainment "of the devil," and religious authority oftentimes took precedence over political authority. The act of performing faced strong social condemnation, regarded in Puritan New England as "one of Satan's deadliest traps for ensnaring the soul of man" (Hornblow 23) and firm anti-theatre laws were passed throughout the colonies. In 1750, Massachusetts passed an act for:

> ... preventing and avoiding the many and great mischiefs which arise from publick stageplays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which not only occasion great and unnecessary expences, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase immortality, impiety, and a contempt of religion (Province Laws 500)

And in the years following, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania did the same, prohibiting actors from performing on religious and moral grounds (Hornblow 24).

But it wasn't the first time that the Hallam family had faced anti-theatre laws. Back in England, the theatrical landscape had undergone a substantial transformation after the Licensing Act of 1737. The act allowed only two patent theatres—Drury Lane and Covent Garden—to produce plays, and scripts required approval from the Lord Chamberlain (head of the royal household) to ensure loyalty to the crown.

Meanwhile, in the colonies, a harsh environment prevented theatre from thriving, although there were some attempts at production before the Hallams' arrival. In Arthur Hornblow's *History of the Theatre in America*, there is a mention in a letter of a 1690 one-time performance of *Gustavus Vasa* by Harvard students. However, scholars have debated if this performance ever occurred, as there is no playbill record. There is record

of an English actor performing in New York on a visit in 1702 (Brown 14). In Williamsburg, Virginia, there are records of the first "purpose-built" theatre in America being erected. In 1760, a regiment of British soldiers put on a theatrical performance of *The Beaux Stratagem* and *The Recruiting Officer*, while stationed in Albany, New York, infuriating the local clergy (Friedman 22).

But theatre scholars seem to agree that the closest thing to a professional theatre company was a troupe run by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean. They had formed a company of amateur performers in Philadelphia in 1749, and produced *King Richard III* and *The Beggar's Opera*, using a "warehouse or brewery (or both)" (Henderson 237). The company performed sporadically, and while they drew large crowds, Kean and Murray were merely entrepreneurs and did not have enough resources or experience to be considered professional producers.

It has been difficult for theatre historians to reliably track every theatrical performance before the Hallams' arrival. Little can be proven due to the public condemnation of playhouses at the time, but also because if there were theatre performances, they were not advertised in newspapers. Instead, performances were announced via handbills handed out by actors who visited homes, inviting guests to the show (Hornblow 23). Thus, while there is evidence of scattered theatrical performances throughout the colonies, there had yet to be a full company of professionals established consistently. The Hallam family and their eventual business partner David Douglass—held immense power, if not all the power, over what theatrical productions were brought to the new world, and how they were interpreted and performed.

In this study, seven plays produced by the American Company between the years 1752-1790 will be analyzed. Chapter One will provide historical context of 18th-century theatre in the colonies. Chapter Two delves into influential political ideology that reflected the revolutionary cause in *Cato*, *The Prince of Parthia*, and *Julius Caesar*. Chapter Three focuses on race and gender influence in the plays *Merchant of Venice*, *The Padlock*, *Othello*, and *The Wonder*. By examining how The American Company controlled what was produced in their professional theatres, and how that control was influenced by their political opinions, we can gain insight into how cultural products can be used to influence public opinion and the implications of this on democracy today.

Since in most American colonies theatre had been banned either by political or religious censorship (Conway 3), running a theatre company and putting on productions was a difficult sport restricted by difficult referees. Puritan leaders and other moral authority figures continued to hold attitudes reflected by the words of Timothy Dwight IV, president of Yale college, in his *An Essay on the Stage*: "to indulge a taste for playgoing means nothing more or less than the loss of that most valuable treasure: the immortal soul" (Dwight 26). But to add an even higher hurdle, political tensions between the American colonies and Britain led to the Continental Congress banning "every species of extravagance...exhibitions of shows, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments" involving trade with Britain until grievances were met (Nathans 37).

While the colonies faced religious leaders who considered theatre morally corrupting, political leaders feared the dangers of large crowds that could turn into rebellious and unmanageable mobs. Hallam Sr. kept an eye on these political evolutions to get a sense of what American audiences might peacefully consume (McNamara 123).

Theatre company managers and their actors who sailed into American ports from London ready to perform were faced with the challenge of either finding a way around the theatre bans or shutting down completely. Most were forced to do the latter. But the Hallams had artfully avoided these hurdles of religious and political censorship and kept their company afloat amidst tumultuous regulatory times (Conway 34).

Figure 1. Theatre in Colonial America.

Actor standing on stage facing a frenzied crowd of impassioned colonists. Cox, Jae. "American Theatre in History." CV Weekly. Accessed April 1, 2024. https://coachellavalleyweekly.com/american-theatre-in-history/

One of the ways The American Company got around these laws was by putting on theatrical productions under the guise of "educational recitals." In 1792, forty years after

the Hallam family's arrival, Lewis Hallam Jr., now a veteran actor and the new manager of The American Company, opened *Hamlet* at a Philadelphia Theatre with a prologue:

> Attend our work, and may you ever find
> Something to please and to improve the mind:
> So may each scene some useful moral show;
> From each performance sweet instruction flow.
> Such is our aim—your kind assent we ask,
> That once obtain'd, we glory in the task.
> (Pollock 26)

While this may read like a poetic moral sermon, the way these sentiments are worded provides a distinct example of how Hallam Sr., for years throughout the family's career, permitted the company to put on productions for colonial audiences during a time when performing theatre was not allowed. Hallam Jr. had witnessed his father navigate around strict regulations and political biases using the mask of "education," as well as claiming political favor with the governors and leaders of the area.

But religion was not the only barrier. As Johnson astutely notes: "The rise of the American theater is far more complicated than a progressive tale of steady triumphs over resistant religious forces" (2). Despite getting around laws and censorship, another obstacle came in the form of a class divide—those wealthy enough to attend theatre did, but most of the colonies were made up of working middle-class citizens who considered theatre a distinctly British toy played by the upper class and those loyal to the crown. As Garrett puts it:

> To offset the scarcity of cash and imported goods, 'Americans' encouraged frugality, home manufacture and the rejection of all things "British," including British plays and players. These radicals joined with rioting mobs to tear down the houses of the "executives" (and, in one instance, a playhouse). Actors clearly had to appeal to an audience whose political views conflicted and vacillated considerably. (Garrett 225)

Since class divide was uniquely tied in with political inclination—those of the working class tended to sympathize with the revolution, while the upper class tended to be Loyalists. This raises the question of where Lewis Hallam Sr. and Jr.—and later manager David Douglass—stood politically. Whether or not they were sympathetic toward the revolution is not clearly stated in writing; there are no known letters or other sources of evidence that convey these implications. However, clues appear in their choices of plays, and in their audience demographic. Garrett theorizes that during the American Revolution, actors were forced to mirror the beliefs of the audience to stay afloat: "Given the political suspicion concerning anything British, there was a decided advantage in being identified as 'American' actors" (227). Additionally, their plays were popular among revolutionary leaders.

Diary entries written by George Washington reveal that he was a constant theatergoer, and a frequent audience member of The American Company productions during seasons they would tour through Williamsburg, Virginia (William and Mary Quarterly 236). Whether their appeal to revolutionary political leaders was sincerity or strategy is unclear—however, if the Hallam family had been staunch loyalists to the British crown, their actions never evidenced it. They had gone so far as to rename their troupe from the "London Company of Comedians" to "The American Company," or, "The American Company of Comedians," in direct response to the Stamp Act of 1765 (Conway 27), which was a tax enacted upon the colonists aimed at funding the British troops' presence in the American colonies, instigating the first rumblings of the revolution.

But to understand the political inclinations of The American Company, we must closely examine the productions they chose to put on. After Lewis Hallam Sr.'s death and David Douglass' takeover as manager of the company, Douglass produced Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in May of 1770—two months after the Boston Massacre shook the colonies and raised concern about British military occupation. In the context of the political tension brewing in Boston and throughout the colonies, the "spirit of liberty breathe[d] in every act and on every occasion" of the production (Garrett 227). Other popular plays such as *The West Indian* and *The Fashionable Lover* were performed several times between 1770 and 1773 and provided "provincial type" characters that American audiences could relate to. For the first time, American audiences were able to see themselves in the roles of the lead characters, who were distinctly "American" in that they were heroized as working-class citizens rather than upper-class British nobility. As Garrett observes, "Colonists could be smug when the provincials in the plays won moral and political victories over Londoners" (228).

Initially, the working-class demographic rejected theatre due to the perception that it was an elitist-only pastime. However, the economic upturn throughout the colonies in the 1760s empowered the everyday citizen to adopt the theatre as a form of middle-class entertainment. Consequently, authors of the 1759 Pennsylvania law and the Massachusetts anti-theatre laws previously mentioned were anxious about potential calamities if working-class individuals were permitted to assemble at theatres in gatherings they feared would turn into mobs (Garrett 224). As late as May 1773, Joseph Quincy Jr., a member of the Boston gentry, was 'much gratified' to visit the Philadelphia playhouse but approved of his own colony's laws against strolling actors:

> As a citizen and friend to the morals and happiness of society I should strive hard against the admission and much more the establishment of a playhouse in any state of which I was a member. (Garrett 225)

It is important to understand some statistics about the colonies at the time. The population at the beginning of the 18th century came to about 650,000. This number was spread widely through the colonies—Newport, considered a metropolis in Rhode Island, had a population of five thousand, which included Native Americans and African slaves. Virginia on the other hand, held sixty thousand—including thirty thousand slaves (Hornblow 28).

Entertainment was limited, and so were places to gather publicly. Only two venues for public gatherings existed for audiences interested in cultural, political, and moral guidance and engagement: the theatre and the church. By understanding this, we stand on a foundation to study the societal dynamics of the time, underscoring the significant roles that both institutions played in shaping the values and experiences of communities. The theatre served as a cultural nexus, providing audiences with a platform to explore and reflect upon the prevailing cultural norms and aesthetics. As established by scholars Johnson and Witham, the theatre was not merely a source of entertainment; it also functioned as a mirror reflecting the societal values, trends, and aesthetic preferences of the era. Through characters and stories, theatre exposed audiences to various facets of human behavior and social dynamics. Furthermore, it often addressed contemporary political issues, allowing for a nuanced exploration of political ideologies and public discourse within a dramatic context.

On the other hand, the church held a central role in providing moral and spiritual guidance that the theatre had not quite yet fleshed out in drama. Congregations gathered for religious services, sermons, and communal rituals, creating a space where individuals

sought instruction, spiritual sustenance, and a sense of belonging. The church was instrumental in reinforcing societal values and norms, offering a moral compass that guided the conduct of its members and played a pivotal role in shaping the behavioral framework of communities (Bonomi et al).

Figure 2. The religious theatre of George Whitefield.

Painting of George Whitefield, 18th-century leader of the Great Awakening, giving a spellbinding performance to a mesmerized audience in a large pasture. Painted 1863. Walley, Thomas. "George Whitefield Preaching in Bolton, June 1750." Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. Accessed April 3, 2024. https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/george-whitefield-preaching-in-bolton-june-1750-163882

However, it is worth noting that the theatre and the church were not mutually exclusive spheres of influence. They sometimes overlapped, particularly in their ability to

convey educational messages. Certain theatrical productions, such as morality plays, which aimed to encourage virtuous behavior, drew on religious and ethical themes, bridging the gap between the moral guidance provided by both institutions. Additionally, audiences were mentally primed to be taught through theatrical performances after George Whitefield swept the colonies, mesmerizing thousands with his theatrical religious sermons. Johnson theorizes that George Whitefield and Lewis Hallam Sr. mutually contributed to the development of professional theatre and American performance during the mid-18th century.

A recurring theme in the scholarly research is that London's theatre scene had a significant impact on the American colonial cultural scene. Fashion, vocabulary, and political opinions were transmitted through whatever theatrical productions managed to slip through restrictions. It seems that theatre stood as something of a newspaper of the time—serving as a unique form of communication and information dissemination, as well as a potential ground for political propaganda in the context of the revolution.

This comparison between theatre and newspapers highlights the significance of theatre as a medium for conveying political information during this period. Information found in colonial newspapers was limited and constricted. While it is true that colonial newspapers in the American colonies during the 18th century often had limited space and resources to cover a wide range of topics, the content of these newspapers was more formal and focused on news from distant places, government announcements, and advertisements (Sturtevant 33). Due to this, newspapers lacked the depth of political opinion and breadth of cultural content that modern newspapers provide.

Theatre, on the other hand, took the form of live entertainment that could depict a wide range of cultural aspects, including aesthetic preferences, trends, styles, and even political opinions. Plays performed in colonial theatres could serve not only as a reflection of society's outward trends but also its inner values and concerns. While costumes, set designs, and performances provided insight into the fashion, decor, and artistic preferences of the era, characters and storylines in these productions reflected and resonated with the audience's experiences and beliefs, and removed the barrier of illiteracy some audience members might have faced had the information been conveyed in writing.

While the statement that "theatre was the newspaper of the time" may be somewhat metaphorical, it does highlight the importance of theatre as a medium for conveying cultural, social, and political information in colonial America, offering a unique perspective on the era's communication dynamics. To delve deeper into this topic, this thesis explores specific historical examples of colonial theatre productions and their impact on shaping public opinion and reflecting the zeitgeist of the time. It will explore how, by deciding what productions were staged, which playwrights commissioned, and which actors employed, the American Company gatekept American "cultural identity" for at least forty years, during the crucial formation period of American theatre. Since this monopoly made the Hallam and Douglass team such an important element in the construction of the new American identity, it is crucial to examine if there was any active promotion of certain values and ideas and suppression of others. This thesis will research such activity, and how they might have orchestrated cultural messages by conveying or reinforcing dominant political narratives of the time.

While there has been research done on singular plays that were popular in the colonies and scholarly conversation has been had on London's major influence on American culture, there has not been enough scholarly discussion about the middlemen whose preferences and choices might have either affected or reflected the audience. How the Hallam family and Douglass, as the leading theatre company owners of the colonies, might have soaked in their societal surrounding's preferences and tendencies and reflected them to a fresh and impressionable audience.

Questions to consider include whether the plays that theatre managers chose to present reflected the changing times, or if the times influenced their decisions on what would be popular. Might theatrical productions have served as vehicles for Revolutionary War propaganda? What were the key themes and messages presented in colonial theatre productions, and how did they reflect the cultural and political values of the time? How did theatre audiences respond to the messages presented in theatrical productions, and what impact did these messages have on shaping cultural identity? This study aims to focus on the role of colonial theatre owners as propagandists and gatekeepers of culture, exploring how their choices of productions shaped public perception of political grievances, social issues, and what it meant to be a citizen in a newly formed nation.

Besides religious authority, there were other serious reasons for why it was hard for early theatre to develop. Mere survival, and navigating the hardships of natural elements, took precedence in the life of colonists, leaving little time for leisure. Theatre, Coad astutely notes, is a communal art, blossoming from the shared experiences of people. In seventeenth-century America, the communal experience needed for dramatic appreciation was seldom achieved, and the demanding conditions of an untamed

environment required the full attention of those risking their lives in the New World. Coad rightfully points out that Shakespeare's intricate art was at odds with the primitive realities of life in the American wilderness. Until pioneers could liberate themselves from the direct struggle with nature, the conventional dramatic methods of conveying thoughts and emotions had to remain deprioritized. And even primitive attempts at theatre were met with a variety of—sometimes violent—objections (Garrett, 223).

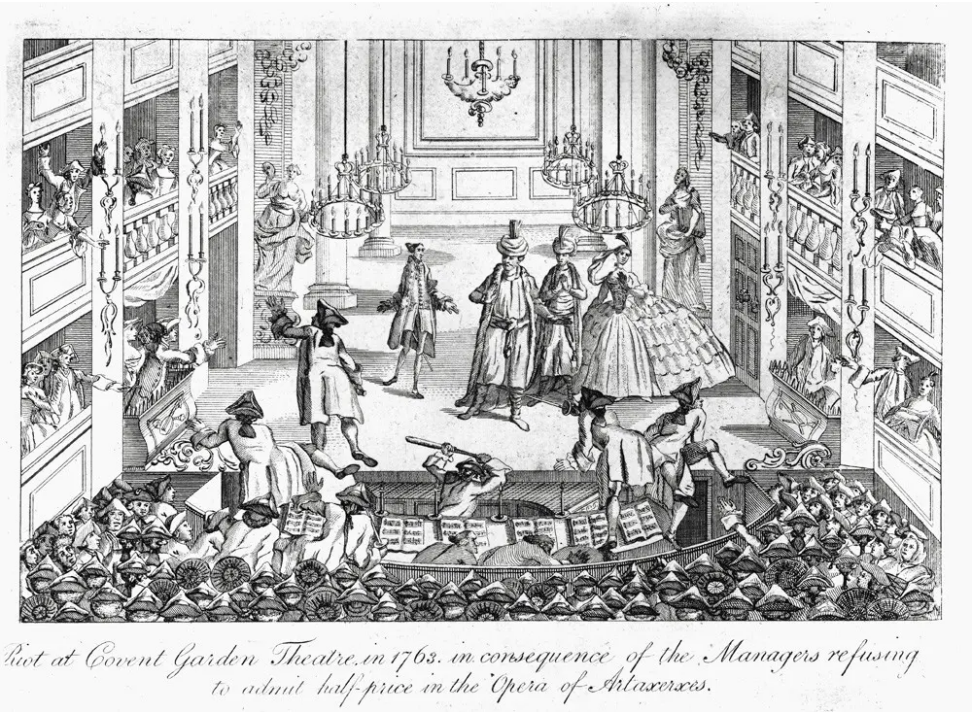
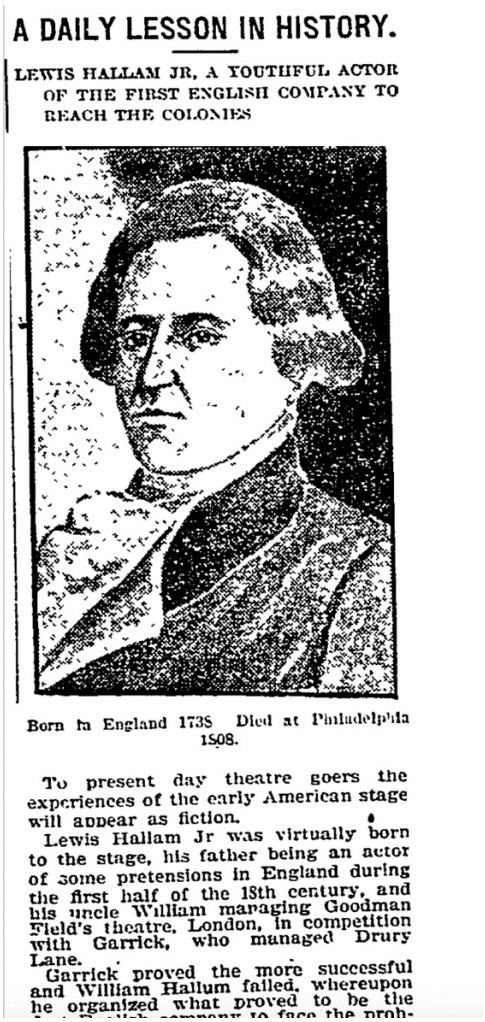


Figure 3. Political Riot at Covent Garden Theatre.

18th-century engraving of a riot interrupting an opera in London. "Riot at Covent Garden Theatre." George Washington's Mount Vernon. Accessed April 3, 2024. https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/colonial-life-today/entertaining-george-washington/#g-750_m-18th-century-opera

Some of the colonies were accepting of theatre. Virginia, for example, was filled with "Virginia planters who were Royalists and kept their affiliation with the Church of England" (Mayorga). These citizens "believed in the luxury of living rather than in making constant preparation for death" (Friedman 37). Other parts of the colonies, composed of Puritans, Quakers, and other serious and pious sects, vehemently opposed the "devil's work" and these deep-seated notions bled into the political authority enough to altogether prevent theatre in some cities (Friedman 39).

In an 1872 issue of the Boston Globe, a "daily lesson in history" article celebrates how Lewis Hallam Jr. had moved to the American colonies from England as a child actor and watched as his father—Lewis Hallam Sr.—set up the first professional stage productions in America (Hopkinson 3). Against the tide of rising political upheaval, the first professional theatre company successfully planted roots on American soil, and the Hallam family soon established a powerful monopoly on theatre in the colonies, having mastered the art of negotiating censorship around theatre bans and other technical hurdles (Hopkinson 5). Johnson argues that despite the colonies' successful separation from Britain, the new national identity of the colonial citizens remained culturally linked to their old British identity—a cultural identity influenced heavily by the theatre.



A DAILY LESSON IN HISTORY.

LEWIS HALLAM JR, A YOUTHFUL ACTOR OF THE FIRST ENGLISH COMPANY TO REACH THE COLONIES

Born in England 1738 Died at Philadelphia 1808.

To present day theatre goers the experiences of the early American stage will appear as fiction.

Lewis Hallam Jr was virtually born to the stage, his father being an actor of some pretensions in England during the first half of the 18th century, and his uncle William managing Goodman Field's theatre, London, in competition with Garrick, who managed Drury Lane.

Garrick proved the more successful and William Hallum failed, whereupon he organized what proved to be the

Figure 4. Life of Lewis Hallam Jr. featured in *The Boston Globe.*

This figure is a short biography and illustration of Lewis Hallam Jr., featured in the 1872 edition of The Boston Globe. "A Daily Lesson in History." The Boston Daily Globe, [Boston, Mass.] Vol. 177, no. 115 Mar. 4, 1872. p. 1. https://lccn.loc.gov/sn83045484

A pivotal juncture in Lewis Hallam Jr.'s career unfolds with his arrival in New York from Jamaica after the Revolutionary War, accompanied by the entire American Company. His dramatic productions were consistently laced with political messaging—anti-crown elements that favored ideas of the revolution. The significance of this is the

fact that it was during these plays—and around this time—that Hallam Jr. earned the reputation as the American colonies' leading Shakespeare interpreter. As the colonies' only known Shakespeare interpreter, this gives us a clue as to how his personal political beliefs might have affected the interpretations of these plays. The selection of plays for production during this period underscores what seems to be an alignment with revolutionary sentiments. Hallam Jr.'s unique professional standing raises questions about how Shakespeare's works were interpreted and how they affected the audience's understanding of the messages in his plays.

We can compare Hallam Jr.'s celebrity power with that of celebrities today—in which a pop culture icon carries the weight of influence on their followers for decisions on how to live and what to purchase. Colonial audiences were similarly impressionable due to the mere lack of cultural leadership. As Odai Johnson argues: England led, and America followed on the topics of fashion and culture. But when it comes to cultural politics—for example, the idea that women could write and publish plays, or the idea that certain races were intellectually inferior—messages were fostered by the surrounding culture and reflected in plays like Lewis Hallam Jr.'s production of *Othello*.

The colonists' transition to their newfound "American" identity, Odai Johnson claims, was a slow one, and despite America's freshly forged independence, London took the lead to form and model the cultural standard of modern civilization (294). London's progressive style influenced fashion, literature, and entertainment in the colonies, and its theatre scene developed actors and produced playwrights, establishing what would become a platform for controversial topics to enter societal conversation (246). Even female playwrights were gaining notoriety for their barbed political satire, and actors of

color were given lead roles in classic and popular productions (Sarkela 541). There was much to learn from London, and one of the only ways to learn was by attending productions produced and performed by those who carried the knowledge of London's popular culture onto American stages.

Supporting Odai Johnson's idea of England's influence on fashion and culture as being one of co-dependence, this impact has similar reflections when considering the impact of cultural politics. Social issues, such as women's rights and lack of political voice, and the nuanced depiction and treatment of specific racial groups, were crucial elements in the evolving American cultural scene. By reviewing the plays chosen, this thesis examines how the American Company shaped the cultural landscape of the colonies by controlling access to works that reflected the collective opinions and values of the time.

Definition of Key Terms

"Monopoly"

A monopoly is distinguished by the exclusive dominance of a singular entity within a specific market or industry (Britannica). In business terms, it is a state of being that possesses unparalleled control over the production and distribution of a particular product or service. To illustrate, the theatrical monopoly the American Company had on the colonies controlled the content and rate of live performances, due to a general lack of competition and the speed and force in which they had marked their territory as the leading troupe.

"Gatekeepers"

In the context of media and journalism, "gatekeeping" refers to the process by which individuals or institutions control access to resources, information, or opportunities before reaching an audience (Merriam-Webster). In the context of social groups or organizations, gatekeeping involves the use of power to regulate who is allowed to enter or participate in the group, as well as what ideas or perspectives are considered legitimate or valuable within the group. Gatekeeping can be intentional or unintentional, explicit or implicit, and can have both positive and negative consequences. The term "gatekeepers" in the context of this thesis will be defined as the individuals who exercise their monopoly and authority to control access to theatrical productions, performances, and interpretations of plays.

"National Identity"

The culture, customs, language, and traditions that make up a cohesive representation of a nation, and of which its citizens associate themselves. Odai Johnson in

London in a Box: Englishness and Theatre in Revolutionary America, raises the critical point that despite the success of the American Revolution and the colonists' physical break from Britain, there remained a saturation of British national identity throughout the colonies' leaders and people in its beginning years. The population's idea of belonging and model for style was still inherently tied to British culture, and the American colonies as a new nation had not developed a culture of its own yet. According to Omar Dahbour in *Public Affairs Quarterly*, two concepts define "national identity" that are common in the academic world—the first one being "a strict one based on a belief in common ancestry or ethnicity" and the second one being "a loose one that views nationality as a malleable term without fixed properties" (17). This definition of national identity will be used in this thesis. This thesis will lean toward the second "looser" form since the American colonies were made up of a variety of ethnicities and ancestries that were influenced by the culture of one nation, and culture consists of arts, language, and other manifestations of intellectual achievement that require malleable terminology.

"Propaganda"

In the context of this thesis, propaganda can be defined as the use of theatre productions to promote certain values, beliefs, or messages that align with the political and social goals of the colonial elite. These productions were intended to shape the cultural identity of colonial society, reinforcing the status quo, and promoting a sense of national identity that aligned with the interests of the ruling class. Propaganda in this context is not necessarily deceptive or manipulative but rather is a tool used to promote a certain worldview and cultural values.

"Theatrical Production"

The term "theatrical production" is commonly defined as written or unwritten work presented by performers to a live audience in a shared physical space, commonly aided by music and costumes, with the intent to entertain or provide information (Osipovich 461). Because theatrical productions took on a variety of forms that are not common in 21st-century theatre—puppet shows, traveling musicians, tavern entertainment, coffeehouse entertainment, and living room performances—it's important to recognize what standard of theatrical production is being described. For this thesis, "theatrical productions" are not puppet shows, musical performances, circus acts, dance acts, or plays printed on pamphlets and not performed by a troupe. This thesis will discuss formal theatre on stage that had been performed by a troupe in designated buildings known as "theatres" throughout the colonies. That is, dramatic or comedic performances by actors, produced by directors, broken into acts, and presented to a live ticketed audience in a designated space, on a stage.

Literature Review

The topic of theatre in the American colonies has been comprehensively examined by theatre historians for several decades, with a focus on specific trends ranging from the anti-theatre bans in early America, the impact of "Englishness" on American culture, and the marginalization of gender and race in theatre. Lisa Freeman states in *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* that in the realm of 18th-century literary and cultural studies, there are two scholarly stances that are widely held. First, the study of 18th-century drama contributes minimally to our understanding of literary forms in the period. Second, the novel, rather than live theater, modeled modern identities and held dominance over other cultural entertainment forms. Freeman contests these stances, emphasizing the importance of studying dramatic performance for its historical significance, and encourages scholars to avoid subdividing the study of theatre into multiple genres that produce a mere historical summary of the productions rather than literary analysis. Freeman argues for studying 18th-century dramatic materials as significant and in need of their own textual analysis. In the way that *The Great Gatsby*, for example, is analyzed in modern schools, these plays deserve to be analyzed for their literary merit and meaning. I agree with Freeman's take and would go further to say that studying these 18th-century productions individually, taking them out of historical context as an exercise in analysis, helps us understand the literary meaning of the text.

Barry Witham approaches the study of 18th-century American theatre from an argumentative lens, in which he claims that there exist three "tensions" in the scholarly atmosphere. First, the study of American theatre is split between plays that were created

by what was “commerce” and what was “art.” One of the facets to study, based on what Witham points out, is what plays were produced for the benefit of commercial success and what plays were produced due to Hallam and Douglass’s motivations to share “art”—or, as this thesis argues—to disseminate certain political opinions.

England’s Cultural Influence

Scholars generally agree that early American theatre was heavily influenced by British theatre traditions, but there is debate about the nature of this influence. Theatre historian Jeffrey Richards leads the claim that early American drama was not shaped by actual transatlantic events or the lives of playwrights and spectators, but rather by British theatrical traditions. He uses the example of "race, religion, and the exotic" (141) and how they were depicted using familiar British stereotypes, even as audiences attempted to reconcile the fluid concept of American identity. I agree with Richards’ theory that some aspects of American theatre—such as distorted portrayals of race—were influenced by British traditions. But only up to the point that American playwrights began publishing works satirizing British culture, as seen in *The Motley Assembly* (1779) by Mercy Otis Warren and Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787).

I agree with Sandra Sarkela, who argues that many American playwrights—including female playwrights who found playwriting to be their only avenue of political expression—were heavily influenced by the leading events of the day. Sarkela argues that playwrights such as Mercy Otis Warren helped energize a base of revolutionary support in the colonies and encouraged radical attitudes against the British government by fictionizing real-life characters (564). Another historian, Sara Lampert, echoes Richards’ sentiments from the standpoint of women in theatre, making the claim that the expansion

of English theatre in America was propelled by women, who contributed to the growth of theatre through their celebrity, attained primarily through word of mouth.

> ...women were drawn into contemporary battles involving tastemakers, theater managers, and the American public over the definition of American culture and its relationship with Europe and over the social ownership of American entertainment. (Lampert 149)

This "battle" over the "definition of American culture" is a theme that carries through much of the literature on this topic.

Odai Johnson, in another article outlining David Douglass's successful entrepreneurship, echoes Richards' theory on British cultural overpowering as well. Johnson argues that American identity was directly linked to British culture by spotlighting the idea that homegrown and original theatrical production was nearly impossible to foster in the new world, and thus culture was essentially imported from London. "Through the plays [Douglass] staged, the scenery and costumes, and the bearing of his actors, he displayed London fashion and London manners" (Johnson 241). Even theatre structures, adds theatre architecture historian Brooks McNamara, were inspired by England's fashionable theatres—and Douglass was quite purposeful in making sure that his American playhouses were built and furnished to resemble the grand English stages from home, firmly establishing a physical British presence (113).

Johnson's arguments regarding the refashioning of the American identity is similar to Richards' theory that the American identity was directly linked to British culture. Both scholars claim that Britain and America's shared heritage was essential in shaping the new nation's identity. But their findings are limited due to focusing on the *styles* of individual plays and directors, rather than examining what *effect* these plays had on the public. Aligning with Sarkela's position regarding the rise of American-bred

playwrights, my thesis will focus on how British theatre was adapted and transformed in American contexts, and how gatekeepers were able to allow for these transformations.

Censorship of Theatre in the Colonies

Another recurring theme in early American theatre research is the study of censorship and restrictions on theatre in the colonies. Matthew Sturtevant makes the case that while Virginia embraced theatre, Massachusetts prohibited it and that these contrasting attitudes can be attributed "largely to the influences of the two colonies' strongest social forces: the Cavaliers in Virginia and the Puritans in Massachusetts" (48). He claims that the states with the most prohibitions were the ones extrinsically linked to religious authority, while the states that were not founded or led by religious leaders pushed for progressive culture.

Bridget McFarland's work illustrates how "anti-theatrical sentiments" were strong in the colonies, particularly in Boston, where leaders like John Hancock and Samuel Adams–an ardent Puritan–held great influence over the future political landscape. These sentiments, McFarland argues, were used to prevent the establishment of theatrical productions, perhaps for political reasons, and created a harsh terrain for social progressiveness (24). My research revolves around individuals who successfully maintained theatrical productions despite these restrictions.

Hallam and Douglass's de facto monopoly was made more powerful by an audience of wealthy theatergoers since tickets were only affordable to the upper class—including avid theatergoers of significant influence, such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington (Brown 11). McFarland's work on anti-theatre laws will add to my research by specifying how American theatre strengthened and blossomed in reaction to

or in—spite of—these bans. McFarland helps answer questions as to whether class and power status played a role in which only a specific sort of audience was able to consume theatre.

Political and Religious Influence

One of the major trends in scholarship includes political influence and propagandistic dimensions of theatre in colonial America—examining how theatrical performances reflected and influenced political tensions of the time. Jason Schaffer makes the case that colonial theatre was used as a tool for political propaganda, especially during wartime when "patriotic tragedies" were popularly performed amongst American troops. These plays included some from Mercy Otis Warren's collection, as well as the patriotically titled *The Fall of British Tyranny: or Liberty Triumphant* (1776), and *The Death of General Montgomery* (1777). These plays, Schaffer argues, "share a propagandistic commitment to the patriot movement's radical Whig politics... designed to stoke the patriotic sentiments" of its audience (Schaffer 21). This will be a foundational theory to piggyback on in this thesis, raising the question of where these plays were performed, and by whom they were produced.

Garrett underlines the "flexible loyalties" of actors who came to America, theorizing that actors were amenable to the audience's whims—whatever political stance the audience held was what the actors would sympathize with to keep their position on stage. He notes that David Douglass "catered to the colonists' ambivalent attitude toward the radical change in other ways...but at the same time he displayed a regard for British royalty, he also took care to make concessions to the distrust of British presence" (Garrett 228). I disagree with Garrett's position on this matter, on the basis that loyalty to the

British *crown* was considered a different thing from loyalty to the British *parliament*. Until 1776, when King George III was defined as a "tyrant" in the Declaration of Independence, George Washington and other founding fathers had toasted to the king's portrait, holding no animosity toward the crown but only toward Parliament, which they believed was the cause of tyrannical bureaucracy (McCullough).

Other scholars point to the ways in which theatre helped to foster a sense of American identity and nationalism. Sarah Purcell observes that patriotic deaths were a recurring theme in these popular patriotic plays, since "patriotic deaths are transactional—willingness to face it for one's country's cause" (Purcell). Besides wartime politics, there was also the matter of social politics. In this way, Johnson and Richards can be referenced once again to contend that women of the colonies were watching London's progressiveness and becoming inspired. In London, female playwrights commonly reached celebrity status (Sarkela 541), and once the theatre ban had lifted in America, women were a predominant part of the growing theatre scene through writing and acting.

According to Lampert, women in the theatre industry were capable of earning equal pay as men. This will be crucial to note in my thesis since The American Company included female actresses in the theatre company. This further emphasizes the gap in research regarding the gatekeeping effect Hallam and Douglass had over the theatre. Was there a point at which they allowed plays from female playwrights? There have only been a few scholars who have ventured to theorize the significant effects these producers had on theatre, and then the effects theatre had on the cultural and social issues of the new nation.

Religion has also been attributed by scholars as being heavily influential on culture and social attitude, and not just because it restricted the theatre scene from flourishing. Vaughn Scribner holds a unique theory that George Whitefield, the famous religious sensationalist and leader of the Great Awakening, and Lewis Hallam Sr., lived lives that illustrated the complex relationships between theatre, religion, and politics in the colonies during the mid-18th century (23). The limitation of this theory is that Hallam's religious opinions are not as documented as George Whitefield's, and although Hallam was a known actor in his own right, audiences did not attend his shows to be converted but to be entertained. Nonetheless, Scribner's thesis raises excellent questions that will help guide my research. Were Hallam's political and religious sentiments reflected in his acting? Were audiences moved by Hallam's theatrical productions at the level they were moved by Whitefield's sermons? Was Whitefield's performative and emotional style censored due to its theatricality? Since there is a possibility that these British theatrical traditions were adapted and transformed in American contexts, it is crucial to consider that producers and directors on American soil had the power to interpret and deliver plays to their audiences with whatever political or religious biases they deemed necessary. Any play, especially an imported play, is up for reinterpretation, and it is important to examine which imported plays had been politically or religiously "Americanized" and when.

Overall, scholars have highlighted the complex interplay between politics, religion, and social factors in shaping theatre in colonial America, and have sought to understand how these different influences interacted with one another to shape the theatrical landscape of the time. There is limited scholarly work on theatre directors and

their specific influence on American culture via the productions they decided to put on in America. While there has been some work on the biographies of the individual directors, there hasn't been a theory on Lewis Hallam and David Douglass's role in shaping a distinct national identity through theatre. By studying social and political biases that may have impacted their interpretation of plays, casting decisions, and goals for the theatre, my thesis will start a conversation about the extent to which theatre directors actively sought to promote national identity or were simply responding to broader cultural trends. This study will provide insights into how colonial theatre owners had power and control over theatrical productions, and how those theatrical productions served as a means of shaping public perception of American cultural identity.

The study of colonial theatre owners as propagandists and shapers of American cultural identity has important implications for our understanding of the ongoing relationship between culture, politics, and national identity in modern society. First, it can help us to better understand the historical roots of the relationship between culture and politics, and how cultural artifacts such as theatrical productions have been used as vehicles for political propaganda throughout history. This understanding can help us to critically examine the cultural products and messaging that we encounter in contemporary society, and to be more aware of how they may be used to shape our perceptions and beliefs.

This examination will also shed light on how propaganda and cultural messaging were disseminated during this period, and the impact of this messaging on shaping American identity. Additionally, it will contribute to ongoing debates about the use of theatrical propaganda in shaping public opinion. By examining how colonial theater

owners used their productions to affect public perceptions of American cultural identity, we can gain insights into the ongoing relationship between culture and national identity, and how cultural products are used to construct and reinforce national narratives. Additionally, this will contribute to broader discussions about the role of culture in shaping political ideology and public opinion.

Chapter II.

Theatre as Revolutionary Propaganda in *Cato*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Prince of Parthia*

The year is 1791. Fifteen years have passed since the Declaration of Independence has been signed. The thirteen colonies have officially formed into a nation called America. And at fifty years old, Lewis Hallam Jr. has come a long way from the eleven-year-old boy docking off a ship from London. By now he has earned a reputation as a leading theatre manager, Shakespeare interpreter, and celebrated actor in the colonies, successfully running, with business partner David Douglass, what is now called The Old American Company. Little does Hallam Jr. know that his company will soon lose its colony-wide monopoly on theatre now that the Continental Congress is about to lift its 40-year-long "ban against all theatrical productions."

The American Company had produced approximately 217 plays in the colonies within the years 1752-1792 (see appendix), not counting the plays performed in Jamaica where the company had fled during the Revolutionary War. While it is impossible given the confines of this thesis to analyze all plays produced and performed, the ones that will be discussed have been specifically chosen for their political and social commentary.

Ironically, it was the ban that had helped the Hallam family enjoy a de facto monopoly on theatre for almost four decades since it had prevented an overflow of competition. For years, the Hallams had managed to work around the ban and other restrictions by disguising their productions as "moral tracts" (Wilmer 17). But by 1791, across the colonies, state leadership debated the merits and harms of the ban. None more vigorously than Massachusetts, where Samuel Adams—known as the "father of the

revolution"—stood before a crowd of fellow Bostonians to argue that theatre should remain banned. In Boston, the anti-theatre ban, titled the "act for preventing stage-plays and other theatrical entertainments," had originally been imposed by the General Massachusetts Assembly in 1750. But when Samuel Adams defended the ban's merit and fought for its reinstalment in 1791, he was booed off-stage by a rowdy pro-theatre crowd. I theorize that Samuel Adams' defense of the ban was motivated by his understanding of the power of theatre—an understanding he earned by being Boston's master of political propaganda. From encouraging hundreds of men to don Mohawk Indian costumes and participate in a "Boston Tea Party," to severely dramatizing an accidental shooting and calling it "The Boston Massacre," Adams understood how influential a mass-attended theatrical stunt could be. Surely, as the perpetrator of such dramatic stunts, he recognized that theatrical dramas with certain political messaging would be dangerous if implemented against the fragile new republic he just helped establish. Why begin this discussion with a mention of Samuel Adams? Because his support for the theatre ban—his fear of theatre's ability to influence—proves the power of theatre. And more specifically, the power of political theatre.

By the 1760s, printed (unperformed) plays were used as propaganda for pro-revolutionary ideals. Religious leaders promoted the publication of dramatic dialogues as a tool for instilling virtuous behavior in youth. And while hundreds of plays were being transplanted from London's busy scene, few American plays emerged before the close of the 18th-century. When they did, they were influenced by the American trend of educational pamphleteering—often written to be read rather than performed (Wilmer 20). As an example, none of Mercy Otis Warren's plays were produced on stage, but they

were printed as popular pamphlets that inspired ideological debates on liberty and rebellion—stirring passion and action for the revolutionary cause. Benjamin Franklin printed four dozen copies of Addison's *Cato* in 1743 (Montgomery 210). In other words, American-bred dramatic works were primarily employed as a means of instruction rather than entertainment, and a significant portion of the plays produced in America during the 1760s and 1770s were "educational" (and if political, then propagandistic) in nature.

This chapter will examine three politically themed (pro-Patriot plays) that were produced and performed by The American Company: *Cato, Julius Caesar,* and *The Prince of Parthia*. Themes of pro-revolutionary messaging and anti-crown sentiments will be examined, as well as what impact these sentiments might have had on the founding fathers and other leaders at the forefront of forming the new nation's political identity.

Cato

Cato was already well-known in England decades before its appearance in America. But it was not as wildly popular with English audiences as it was with American ones. During an era of rising political tensions, in which the desire for freedom from governmental oppression was a heightened topic, *Cato* was immediately embraced by colonists. Written by British playwright Joseph Addison in 1713, the story centers around Cato Uticensis, a senator in the ancient Roman Empire who opposed Julius Caesar's rise to power as emperor. Taking place after Caesar's triumph over his republican adversaries at the Battle of Pharsalia, the storyline unfolds as Cato, accompanied by his children and allies, withdraws to the city of Utica. Caesar lays siege to the city, prompting Cato and his allies to resist for as long as possible. However, confronted with two mutinies, one resulting

in the death of his son, Cato ultimately chooses to sacrifice his own life by falling on his sword rather than surrender. In an advertisement engraving of British actor John Kemble starring as Cato in 1799, an eagle scepter, sword, open book, and Roman garments reflect strong political themes.

Figure 5. John Kemble as “Cato”

Engraving of actor John Kemble playing Cato in the 1799 production of “Cato” by Joseph Addison. Addison, Joseph. “Cato.” Gutenberg Project: Internet Archives. 1799. https://archive.org/details/catotragedy00addi/page/n7/mode/2up

While *Cato* had found its way to the colonies in 1732 and was sporadically performed by amateur troupes and college students (Wilmer 29), The American Company provided its professional debut on November 6, 1754 at their new venue of the Williamsburg Theatre. It's worth noting that while the rest of the colonies had anti-theatre regulations, Virginia and Maryland were the sole colonies that abstained from imposing strict theatre bans. *Cato* garnered significant popularity, effectively capturing the overarching theme of the struggle between tyranny and liberty, topics that colonial audiences were already primed to hear and discuss with passion. Most notably, evidence of Cato's influence is found in writings by the Founding Fathers, the Framers, and specifically George Washington, who found the play so stirring he had his troops put on a production of it during the harsh station at Valley Forge:

> At Valley Forge Washington had the play presented to bolster morale, with himself and Mrs. Washington in attendance. We are told that his soldiers packed the playhouse to the doors since the play was, in fact, the very Bible of republican idealism. (Montgomery 210)

Some scholars suggest that *Cato* was Washington's favorite play—whether or not this is true, it is known that he had frequented The American Company's production of it at the Williamsburg Theatre.

Set in ancient Rome, lead character Senator Cato Uticensis is known for his unwavering commitment to republican principles and becomes a symbol of the enduring struggle for liberty and virtue. In Act IV, Scene IV, Cato urges the senators to oppose Caesar's rise to power, stressing the importance of safeguarding Roman liberties and averting the threat of tyranny. The verses evoke a sense of urgency, advocating watchfulness against the encroachment of oppressive rule and excessive authority:

> No, senators, we must not let him reign;
> The liberties of Rome are in your keeping;

> You must prevent him. Rise, my lords, with speed,
> And give him check, before he mounts too high
> And gains the hill, and puts the world below
> His feet, where he may stand secure, and from
> His eminence look down on all mankind.
> Were I your leader, and our arms had conquered,
> I would not chain my country. The disgrace
> And infamy to mankind be my share;
> But let me boast that we have driven the tyrant
> Beyond the borders which divide the nations.

The urgency in Cato's plea mirrors the apprehensions of the Founding Fathers, who were deeply concerned with preserving individual freedoms and guarding against the encroachment of tyrannical rule. This not only functions as a cautionary narrative but also as an urging for action, echoing the revolutionary ethos and the pursuit of individual freedoms that defined this era. According to the political theory espoused by constitutional framer James Madison, “the great problem to be solved” was to create governing institutions that could provide "practical security" against the undue accumulation of political power (Federalist Papers No. 48). The rise to power depicted in Cato’s monologue reflects this “great problem” associated with concentrated authority, rhetoric that motivated the Framer’s decisions.

During his presidential term in 1789, George Washington organized gatherings to head to the theatre, inviting distinguished dignitaries and members of Congress to watch. But before his presidential term, he had referenced *Cato* a few times in his letters during the war: “Tis not in mortals to command success,” and, “the post of honor is a private station.”

> Cato's impact on Washington's conduct has fascinated historians... [as a] teenager, Washington "had read Addison's *Cato* with Sally Fairfax; years later he had the play performed for his troops at Valley Forge; by then, people were saying he was Cato. (Elkins 48)

The notion of George Washington perceiving his role as first president as a "private post," and himself as a public servant to the people, reflects a fundamental aspect of his political philosophy and leadership style. Much like Cato's devotion to private public service, Washington's perspective on the presidency is intricately connected to his commitment to public service. Historian Henry Wiencek wrote:

> When Washington wished to bestow the highest praise on an officer for achieving a victory... he sent a message paraphrasing *Cato*: 'It is not in the power of any man to command success, but you have done more - you have deserved it. (Wiencek 36)

Cato's loyalty to country is illustrated in a private and steadfast commitment to these ideals, even in the face of personal sacrifice: "When vice prevails, and impious men bear sway, / The post of honor is a private station" (*Cato* Act I Scene IV). Moreover, the notion of suffering quietly, as attributed to Washington's ideals of stoicism, finds a parallel in Cato's portrayal as a leader who endures personal hardships without complaint. Cato's stoicism in the face of adversity reflects a commitment to duty and a principled stance that mirrors Washington's approach to the challenges of his presidency.

Certain scholars maintain that Cato adamantly avoids being construed as a partisan allegory, while others assert that it is undeniably a pro-revolution text, actively promoting pro-Whig ideals such as liberty, sacrifice, and patriotic virtue (Wilmer 30). Theatre historian Lisa Freeman notes that these values are essentially the only principles on which contemporary critics find common ground when analyzing the play. To prove its rousing effect: in the early 1770s, members of the audience—especially those in the more affordable seats—sporadically disrupted performances for political reasons, vocalizing their anti-British sentiments within the theaters. A significant incident occurred on December 1772 at the Philadelphia theatre, when a riot unfolded outside the

gallery door during an American Company's performance of *Cato*. The perpetrators symbolically removed the "iron spikes which divide the galleries from the upper boxes," challenging the class divisions perceived in both the theater and society. This event reflects an endeavor by Patriot demonstrators to symbolically reshape societal attitudes toward class, pushing toward a more egalitarian concept of national identity.

A little over a week before the infamous Boston Tea Party event of 1773, Abigail Adams penned a letter to her close confidante Mercy Otis Warren addressing the recent arrival of British tea, which had docked days earlier. As tensions between the American colonies and Britain escalated toward the brink of war, Boston stood as the epicenter of anti-British sentiment. Abigail's letter to Mercy captures the essence of the prevailing colonial mindset during this critical juncture in history.

> Altho the mind is shocked at the Thought of sheding Humane Blood, more Especially the Blood of our Countrymen, and a civil War is of all Wars, the most dreadfull Such is the present Spirit that prevails, that if once they are made desperate Many, very Many of our Heroes will spend their lives in the cause, With the Speech of Cato in their mouths, 'What a pitty it is, that we can dye but once to save our country [emphasis added]. (Warren)

The figure of Cato evolved into a symbolic representation of anti-government sentiments, and the pseudonym "Cato" found occasional adoption by authors who crafted particularly provocative remarks about England. John Adams showcased familiarity with the play by quoting *Cato* to denounce Parliament and its representatives, expressing, "Curse on their virtues, they've undone their country!"

Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech was inspired by a line from the play: "It is not now time to talk of aught / but chains, or conquest; liberty, or death." Nathan Hale, an American Revolutionary War spy, is remembered for incorporating a line from the play into his final words on the gallows. His paraphrase, "I

only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," echoes the sentiment from *Cato*: "What a pity is it / That we can die but once to serve our country."

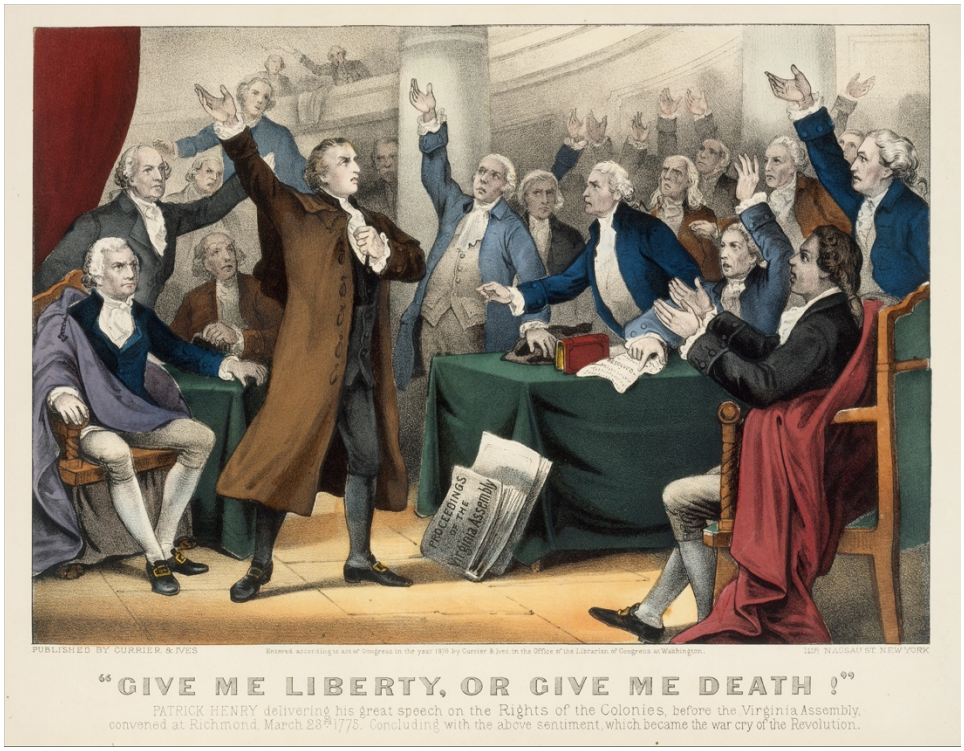


Figure 6. Patrick Henry's *Cato*-inspired speech.

Hand-colored lithograph of Patrick Henry giving his famous "Give me Liberty or Give me Death!" speech on the rights of the Colonies before the Virginia Assembly in 1775. Harry T. Peters Currier & Ives, Printmakers to the American People. 2 vols., Garden City, NY, 1931, cat. no. 986. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/380487

Performances of *Cato* by the Hallam and Douglass troupe, aligning with Whig perspectives, attracted widespread attention due to their articulate speeches advocating for a free nation:

> Meanwhile we'll sacrifice to liberty.
> Remember, O my friends, the laws, the rights,

> The generous plan of power delivered down,
> From age to age, by your renowned forefathers,
> (So dearly bought, the price of so much blood,)
> Oh let it never perish in your hands!
> But piously transmit it to your children.
> Do thou, great liberty, inspire our souls,
> And make our lives in thy possession happy,
> Or our deaths glorious in thy just defence.
> (Cato Act 3, Scene 2)

These productions sometimes escalated into riots, as exemplified by the Sons of Liberty disrupting activities at the Chapel Street Theatre in New York amid protests linked to the Stamp Act. The situation escalated to the point where a crowd invaded the audience during a performance, resulting in one man's death. Subsequently, the rioters dismantled and set fire to the theatre—an act that brought "to the Satisfaction of many at this distressed Time, and to the great Grievance of those less inclined for the Good so they can something up" (Wilmer 18). The reason for the Sons of Liberty's violence toward that theatre was a response to the fact that the Company had been given permission to perform by General Thomas Gage, a despised figure among colonists and a staple enemy to the revolutionary cause (Reiter).

Although *Cato* had already gained recognition in England before reaching its American audience, its impact took on a distinct significance in the colonies, resonating with revolutionary leaders during a period of heated political tensions as the threat of war lurked on the horizon. The popularity of *Cato* in the American colonies reflects a symbolic roadmap of the intellectual landscape leading up to the revolution, and its clear influence on political leaders of the time underscores the significant role that political theatrical productions can play in shaping the ideals and aspirations of a nascent nation.

Julius Caesar

History has taught that great societal change is propelled, above all, by stirring and compelling rhetoric addressed to a mass of people who then subsequently act upon that rhetoric. Notable episodes in American history serve as memorable examples of this. For instance, William Lloyd Garrison's impassioned oration at Park Street Church in Boston in 1829 marked a seminal moment in history as his first major statement for abolishing slavery (Byrum 28). Patrick Henry's iconic "Give me Liberty, or Give me Death!" speech, delivered in a courtroom with fervent echoes of Cato, reverberated through time as a rallying cry for the American revolutionary spirit. Samuel Adams' speech, delivered at the pulpit of Boston's Old South Meeting House in 1773, stirred a crowd of 700 onlookers to dump tea into the Boston harbor, sparking war with Britain.

The revolutionary era, as exemplified by these historical moments, stands out as a period rich in instances where persuasive language galvanized support for the revolutionary cause. These moments underscore the profound influence of linguistic prowess in shaping public sentiment and fostering a collective commitment to the ideals of independence. *Julius Caesar* exemplifies the profound influence of rhetoric and oratory powers on political discourse—a concept best illustrated in Mark Antony's funeral oration, in which he utters the infamous, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" (Act III Scene II).

The American Company staged twelve Shakespearean plays from 1752 to 1790, and nine conveyed strong anti-imperial sentiments. However, none among the listed productions articulated as explicit a rhetoric advocating for liberty and providing a cautionary narrative against tyranny as *Julius Caesar*. The Founding Fathers, deeply

immersed in the study of the Roman Empire's historical trajectory encompassing both ascent and decline, sought insight for the governance of their newly established nation wherever they could, but most especially in history:

> The eighteenth century was the great age of Whig history, and American writers who wished to protest real or imagined infringements of their rights enthusiastically seized upon the whiggish historians' grand design as a valuable intellectual weapon. They ransacked history looking for correspondences to their own situation, to contemporary English society, and to the developing imperial relationship. (Shuffleton 14)

Hence, the staging of *Julius Caesar* by The American Company in the colonies assumes particular significance, given its resonance with the prevailing intellectual milieu and the Founding Fathers' preoccupation with the Roman Empire's valuable lessons. *Julius Caesar* delves into the political upheaval in ancient Rome as Julius Caesar's triumphant return sparks concern among senators, particularly Senators Cassius and Brutus. Fearing Caesar's unchecked power, Cassius convinces Brutus to join a conspiracy aiming to assassinate Caesar for the perceived greater good of Rome. The plot unfolds on what has now become the symbolic "Ides of March" in the Senate, leading to chaos and civil unrest. In the play, Mark Antony's stirring funeral oration further fuels the flames of rebellion among Roman citizens. Battles ensue between the conspirators. Despite initial victories, the conspirators face eventual defeat, and both Brutus and Cassius meet tragic ends. The play concludes with Mark Antony eulogizing Brutus as "the noblest Roman of them all."

By the 18th century, *Julius Caesar* in the theatre underwent a noticeable shift, marked by a discernible transition towards more explicitly political and secular assumptions. Historian John Ripley's examination of the American rendition of Julius Caesar reveals a deliberate effort in the neo-classical fashion, involving modernization of

vocabulary, clarification of syntax, and preservation of decorum of expression (26). In this new Whig interpretation, Brutus becomes the de facto hero, specifically in his opposition to tyranny. Two couplets were added, for example, to Brutus's dying speech:

> Now one last look, and then farewell to all.
> That wou'd with the unhappy Brutus fall.
> Scorning to view his Country's Misery,
> Thus Brutus always strikes for Liberty
> (Ripley 29)

Several years later, a prologue was crafted to be delivered by the "Ghost of Shakespeare" (Ripley 23-24), unmistakably emphasizing Whig principles by drawing a comparison between Caesar and Philip II of Spain. Implicitly invoking the recent memory of James II, the prologue, presented in 1706, further solidifies the Whig political stance in its allusions and contrasts:

> Then I brought mighty Julius on the stage,
> Then Britain heard my godlike Roman's rage,
> And came in crouds, with rapture came, to see,
> The world from its proud tyrant freed by me.

Ripley theorizes that even though Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* saw infrequent performances in the American colonies—with only six recorded—it was likely a frequent subject of reading, since copies of Shakespeare's works were commonly collected in both private and public libraries of the colonies (24).

The influence of rhetoric in *Julius Caesar* is reflected the most in Thomas Paine's Common Sense, arguably one of the most important Revolutionary War manuscripts to have been written. In one notable passage, Paine writes, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind," echoing the universal appeal and the broader significance Antony imparts to Caesar's assassination, aligning their rhetorical strategies.

By portraying the quest for American independence as a cause surpassing national confine, the intention is to evoke a feeling of common humanity and shared responsibility. This intention parallels Marc Antony's oration in *Julius Caesar*, wherein he aligns Caesar's destiny with the overarching fate of Rome (Ripley 26):

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.
> I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
> The evil that men do lives after them;
> The good is oft interred with their bones —
> (Act III Scene II)

In the realm of literature, *Julius Caesar* enjoyed widespread readership and admiration among eighteenth-century American intellectuals. Amidst the Revolutionary War, Abigail Adams, in her letters to her husband John, referenced passages such as "There is a tide in the affairs of men" (Act IV Scene III), and occasionally adopted the signature 'Portia' (Adams). Thomas Jefferson, in his commonplace book where he transcribed lines from favored poets, initiated the compilation with selections from *Julius Caesar*, particularly focusing on themes of life, honor, and death. A contemporary critic known as "Theatricus," one of the earliest American drama critics, hailed the play as 'unrivalled in the dramatic world' (Ripley 27), deeming it exceptionally suited to the prevailing spirit of the times. "Theatricus" asserted that the play, with its profound spirit of liberty and the author's use of elegant and sublime language, evoked equal measures of surprise and delight.

The play's libertarian sentiment no doubt motivated the American Company to add it to their repertory just as revolutionary fervor was approaching its fever pitch. Announcing the inaugural performance at Philadelphia's prestigious Southwark Theatre

on June 1, 1770, the American Company's advertisement for the upcoming production was laced with patriotic language:

> The noble struggles for Liberty by that renowned patriot Marcus Brutus' together with the remarkable orations of Brutus and Antony... the first shewing the necessity of Caesar's death, to give Freedom to the Roman People; the latter to enflame their minds, and excite them to a commotion, in which the orator succeeds, and is the cause of the civil wars. (*Stage History*)

The juxtaposition of rhetorical skill and political power seems carefully crafted to resonate with an audience increasingly enamored with charismatic speakers. As Ripley notes, *Julius Caesar* is presented in a way that embodies the classical ideals and republican fervor of late eighteenth-century America. Records show that the American Company produced six documented performances of the play between 1770 and 1802. In 1774, Charleston played host to one performance, while Philadelphia witnessed two in 1770 and 1791, and New York City experienced three in 1788, 1791, and 1802 (Ripley 100).

Another politically themed advertisement for the American Company's 1794 production, under the management of Lewis Hallam Jr. and John Henry, reveals a cast comprising sixteen men and two women with blatant language addressing King George III. Hallam Jr., having served as the Company's leading man for three decades, and Henry, with an extensive history in supporting roles, maintained these roles during all production dates:

> The American production at Philadelphia's Southwark Theatre in June, 1770, depicted 'The noble struggles for Liberty by that renowned patriot Marcus Brutus . . . shewing the necessity of his [Caesar's] death' and the <u>tyrant</u> Caesar [emphasis added] would not have brought King Philip II or King James II to the mind of this audience as readily as King George III. (Ripley 100)

As society progresses, the role of theatre in shaping political ideologies and challenging dominant narratives becomes increasingly pertinent, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between the entertainment industry and the socio-political landscape. Harvard-based scholar Jeffrey Wilson uses Shakespeare as an example, commenting that Shakespeare had held a somewhat monopolistic power on the political landscape of his time, forging the path to theatre-influenced politics:

> Specifically, Shakespeare's ironic mode made his drama uniquely appealing to the political liberals at the forefront of English culture. Shakespeare and his proponents were both antiauthoritarian: the literary antiauthoritarianism in his drama... That is why the plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and continue to have on personal and political life in the world. (Wilson 38)

Records suggest a noticeable waning of enthusiasm for *Julius Caesar* in the latter half of the eighteenth century—this decline in popularity, particularly evident after the revolution and after the play's initial performances in America, suggests its clear connection to the country's newfound association with Whig ideals, indicating that its popularity and interest was linked to the societal excitement of the Revolutionary War.

The Prince of Parthia

Historians have yet to unearth evidence regarding the personal political opinions of Lewis Hallam Sr., Lewis Hallam Jr., or David Douglass, but it may be enough to examine their actions and theorize that the plays they produced in the colonies—as analyzed in this thesis—leaned decidedly toward Patriot ideology. For example, The American Company would infuse otherwise neutral performances with politically

relevant content, as evidenced by incorporating a prologue alluding to "the sweets of Liberty" in a Philadelphia rendition of *Hamlet* in 1773 (the year of the Boston Tea Party).

Some scholars argue that the actors' and producers' political loyalties were "flexible," and catered to the audience's political inclinations rather than the other way around. But I argue that of the hundreds of pro-England plays that the American Company could have produced, they chose instead to produce plays that had specific propagandistic messages in favor of the revolution. This is perhaps evidence enough to theorize that they were supporters of the revolution, or at the very least were not opposed to the values aligned with it.

The most compelling argument for this theory is the fact that The American Company agreed to debut the first American-bred play, *The Prince of Parthia*, written in the colonies by an American-born playwright Thomas Godfrey in 1759. Not only was Godfrey American, setting his work apart from all other theatrical productions up until this point, but he was closely associated with revolutionary sympathizers Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin West, and John Green. Godfrey even served as a lieutenant with Pennsylvania troops in 1758, and his plays and poetry were published by fellow revolutionary Dr. William Smith (Shuffleton 32). Up until then, every play produced by the company and other troupes had been an import—if not from England, then adapted by Englishmen from another country or language. The time, money, and resources required to put on a production was significant.

Thus, premiering a somewhat unknown play written by a Whig writer was a gamble that would lead to enormous loss if the production were to fail. It is difficult to find possible motivation or incentive to take on such a gamble unless there was a

guaranteed outcome of financial success or positive response. These two factors were promised from every other play The American Company produced, because those plays had a proven track record of popularity back in London where they were originated. Therefore, The American Company's decision to premiere *The Prince of Parthia* should not be downplayed, since the content of this play leans heavily toward themes of liberty and nationalism, and it was premiered in 1767, at the very time in which these topics were of lively, active discussion in pre-revolutionary America.

> If *The Prince of Parthia*, written in 1759, seemed valuable enough for Douglass' American Company to stage in 1767, we should perhaps be ready to find for it a larger place in our national culture than that of merely a literary curiosity. (Shuffleton 13)

The five-act tragedy *The Prince of Parthia* is loosely rooted in classical history and might be categorized as theatrical historical fiction. Godfrey drew inspiration from various Shakespearean plays, incorporating themes of seduction (like in *Othello*), sentimental drama (like in *King Lear*), and revenge (like in *Hamlet*). The narrative includes discussions on slavery and tyranny, which coincide with Whig political ideology, particularly set against the backdrop of Stamp Act protests, which were happening around the same time of the play's premiere.

Typically, an evening at the theater during this period extended for four to five hours, illuminated by candlelight, and enriched with painted backdrops, wigs, makeup, and elaborate costumes. But *The Prince of Parthia* stood out for its simplicity—with much dialogue and little action. It enjoyed an extensive run, performed over one hundred nights from 1766 to 1767. Not only was it the first American play to be produced, it also marked the debut of Samuel Grenville, the first American to pursue a professional acting career, who also later portrayed Horatio in *Hamlet* (Ball 175). The production sparked

lively public debates in local newspapers and around twenty essays that explored the potential of the stage to inspire discussions of virtue, liberty, and common moral concerns.

In the April 23, 1767 edition of *The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, the upcoming production was advertised:

> By Authority, Never Performed before, By the American Company,/at the New Theatre, in Southwark,/On Friday, the Twenty-fourth of April, will be/presented, A Tragedy written by the late ingenious/Mr. Thomas Godfrey, of this city, called the/Prince of Parthia./The Principal Characters by Mr. Hallam,/Mr. Douglass...To begin exactly at Seven o'clock. — Vivant Rex & Regina. (as quoted in "The Prince of Parthia: A Tragedy" via *Project Gutenburg*)

The unique setting of this play begs for a look at the history of the setting, as well as a deeper discussion behind the symbolism of the setting and era. Rather than choose to set the play in the Roman Empire—which, as illustrated in *Julius Caesar* and *Cato*, was a popular setting for cautionary tales about the dangers of imperial tyranny—Godfrey chose to set his play in Parthia. Parthia was an ancient Iranian empire that emerged during the third century BCE when the Parni tribe revolted against the Seleucid Empire, establishing an autonomous kingdom in northeastern Iran. Parthia rose as a formidable force, experiencing a golden era at the level of Roman success, but instability, struggles for succession, and conflicts with Rome precipitated the decline of the Parthian Empire.

Numerous scholars have scrutinized Thomas Godfrey's decision to make the Empire of Parthia the setting for Prince of Parthia, often deeming it "odd" or "unusual." However, closer examination reveals that the parallels between Parthia and the Roman Empire, coupled with Parthia's historical downfall resulting from internal discord—an issue considered paramount by the Founding Fathers—rationally justify Godfrey's choice and elucidates his thought process. By opting to fictionalize an actual historical episode,

Godfrey enhances the symbolism of the Founding Fathers' main concerns on creating a republic. Moreover, the fascination of the educated class in America with Eastern empires suggests that Parthia was likely a recognized entity during the time, even if its historical significance had somewhat faded from contemporary history textbooks. As historian Frank Shuffleton notes:

> One of the lessons historians from Herodotus onward taught was that to observe a contemporary despotism, one need only look to the East. There was always an Asiatic threat to liberty. (13)

The Prince of Parthia unfolds as a nuanced criticism of England's monarchical system. This embedded critique within the play anticipates the more intricate criticisms of the British empire that would unfold in subsequent years—a cautionary exposé illustrating the dangers associated with despotic authority. Audiences sought a "national drama, which they defined not only as a drama on American incidents and manners but also as one that inspired a flamboyant patriotism" (Wolter 13). Regarding theatre as an "important instrument for the formation of national character" (14), it is difficult to imagine that Hallam and Douglass were not sympathetic to Whig ideals after analyzing this play. Not only does it convey a blatant revolutionary message, but the decision to produce *The Prince of Parthia* without assured success implies a forward-thinking initiative. The politics-heavy move seems driven by an intention to cultivate American-based talent and foster cultural independence, laying the groundwork for the subsequent growth of American drama.

Chapter III.

Revolutionary Symbolism Through Race and Gender in *The Padlock*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice,* and *The Wonder*

Four plays—*The Padlock, Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice,* and *The Wonder*—will be discussed in this chapter. I will examine elements of racial prejudice that are the main themes in *Othello* and *The Padlock,* and how those negative stereotypes were associated with the British government for propagandistic efforts. Then, I will analyze *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Wonder* for their portrayals of the positive consequences of rebellion.

Establishing Stereotypes through Blackface in *The Padlock*

Blackface minstrelsy in American theatre from the 19th century onward has been a widely studied topic, but there were also a handful of blackface performances during the 18th century worth noting. Of these, none were more produced and popular than Shakespeare's *Othello* and Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Padlock*. Scholar Josephine Lee claims in *Oriental, Black, and White: The Formation of Racial Habits in American Theater* that by the 19th century, depictions of black slaves had a distinctive stereotyped caricature that was not influenced by Jim Crow as much as it had been influenced by "Mungo," a lead character in the wildly popular play *The Padlock*. *The Padlock* was originally a Spanish play called *The Jealous Husband* that was adapted into an English play by Isaac Bickerstaff. Charles Dibdin, an actor and composer, penned both the music and lyrics for the theatrical production and took on the role of Mungo, performing in blackface (Frazier

18). Set in Salamanca, Spain, the story of *The Padlock* centers around a young girl, Leonora, engaged to an older man, Don Diego, who locks her in his house with a padlock for fear that she will not be faithful to him. Also locked in the house is the old man's servant, Mungo, a black slave from the West Indies. Mungo is constantly grubbing for money, drinking, and singing. Due to his musical performances and providing most of the comedy in the show, Mungo is considered the center of the play.

Figure 7. Charles Dibdin in blackface as "Mungo" in *The Padlock*.

Charcoal portrait of actor Charles Dibdin painted in blackface, wearing striped breeches, bending to lift a basket. Text beneath: "Me with to my Heart me was Dead, Dead, Dead." Printed 1762. Bowles, C. "Charles Dibdin as Mungo in The Padlock." University of Illinois Theatrical Print Collection. Accessed February 3, 2024. https://digital.library.illinois.edu/items/929a5b10-4e7d-0134-1db1-0050569601ca-1#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&r=0&xywh=1461%2C3837%2C2825%2C2425

The Padlock first premiered in 1768 at Drury Lane in London and debuted in America one year later, at the John Street Theatre in New York (Frazier 19). Most popular in Philadelphia, the play was a staple during almost every season, regularly performed from its debut in 1769 to around 1800, around 81 times in America. While the character Mungo premiered in London in 1768, Hallam Jr. was the first to bring the character to the colonies and the first to bring the black dialect to the American stage (Frazier 19). Hallam Jr. had learned this dialect while living in Jamaica during the Revolutionary War, and for this debut he received recognition and "higher praise than was ever before given to any part acted on the American stage" (Seilhamer 222), forging a signature role.

Theatre historian William Dunlap observed that "Mr. Hallam was unrivalled to his death, giving the 'Mungo' a truth derived from study of the Negro slave character, which Dibdin the writer could not have conceived" (Dunlap 222). Hallam Jr.'s wild popularity and positive reception are evidenced in the enthusiastic discussion of his performance in a newspaper article published in *The Columbian Centinel* in 1792. In it, a black servant is said to have seen the play and is asked for an opinion on Hallam Jr.'s portrayal of his "fellow countryman":

> ... The African in simplicity of heart replied – Massa He no my countrymen . . . The character must have been will filled to have given rise to the African's observation. In truth, it is impossible that the negro can be personated with more appropriate accent and gesture than by Mr. HALLAM in that character. (Frazier 24)

There is debate on whether *The Padlock* is an anti-black play or holds subtle anti-slavery play elements that, despite caricaturing Mungo's mannerisms, humanize him and create a character that audiences can sympathize with. On the one hand, Mungo's West Indies dialect is purposefully and offensively ungrammatical. The utilization of a West

Indies "black" dialect and broken English for Mungo exemplifies a historically derogatory depiction that reinforces racial stereotypes and aids in the dehumanization of black individuals. Within Bickerstaff's framework, this dialect is not employed to elicit sympathy or comprehension but rather to exploit racial disparities for comedic effect:

> And, Massa, be not angry pray
> If Neger man a word should say;
> Me have a fable pat as she,
> Which wid dis matter will agree:
> An owl once took it in his head,
> Wid some young pretty bird to wed;
> But when his worship came to woo,
> He could get none but de cuckoo.
> (Act 1)

The representation of Mungo's speech in a stereotypical West Indies dialect, replete with grammatical errors and linguistic distortions, perpetuated the period's general notion that black individuals were intellectually inferior, implying an inability for articulate and coherent communication. Such depictions contribute to a degrading and demeaning image of enslaved people, reinforcing the prevailing racist attitudes of the time.

There are also glaring sentiments throughout the story that distinctly disgrace Mungo. In the play's final act, Don Diego realizes his selfish behavior and articulates the motives behind his actions—that he locked his fiancée up to keep her for himself, and that he tried banishing any man from entering the residence. In Don Diego's words, anyone who carried "the shadow of man or mankind" was not allowed inside (Bickerstaff 31). However, Mungo had not been banished from Don Diego's house. This harshly implies that since Don Diego allowed for Mungo to be in the house, he doesn't perceive Mungo as a man. Devoid of humanity, Mungo exists in a separate category from man, since Don Diego does not consider Mungo to possess a "shadow of man or mankind" (Frazier 19).

This perspective is comedically played off in the final scene of the play. Cloaked behind statements of humble confession, the scene manages to heroize Don Diego's character while blatantly stating his disregard for "Mungo's" existence.

On the other hand, within the limitations of these stereotypical portrayals, there are a few humanizing moments for Mungo's character. Like Shylock's "Hath Jews not eyes?" monologue in *The Merchant of Venice*, Mungo sings a pitiful soliloquy that describes his horrifically deprived existence as a slave:

> Dear heart, what a terrible life am I led!
> A dog has a better, that's shelter'd and fed;
> Night and day, 'tis de same,
> My pain is dere game:
> Me wish to de Lord me was dead.
> Whate'ers to be done,
> Poor blacky must run;
> Mungo here, Mungo dere,
> Mungo every where;
> Above and below,
> Sirrah, come; sirrah, go;
> Do so, and do so.
> Oh! oh!
> Me wish to de Lord me was dead.
> (Act 1)

Mungo's genuine expression of sadness and self-pity—and the "wish" for his own death—evokes empathy and a shared sense of humanity for the dire circumstances of his existence. The line "my pain is dere game" villainizes the slave master's intentions and motivations, implying that Don Diego finds entertainment in abusing Mungo. Additionally, Mungo shows some agency and independence when he verbally argues with his master, calling Don Diego an "old dog" (Bickerstaff 27) and ridiculing him for using a padlock to cover his insecurities. While there may be hints of humanity and autonomy in Mungo's

character, they do not outweigh the amount of times Mungo is called a “monster” or “villain” or “slave” by the other characters and is meant to be laughed *at* instead of *with*.

Mungo the character is emblematic of a minority status, occupying a position on the periphery of cultural significance. Pantomime, farce, and comic opera was associated with "lower" class (Carlson). Thus, giving Mungo—but none of the other characters—comic opera songs and orations, signals a departure from conventional highbrow theatrical traditions. By embracing these "low" genres and placing Mungo center stage, this production uniquely amplified the voice and experiences of a character who had been traditionally marginalized in mainstream cultural narratives.

This deliberate subversion of theatrical norms serves as a powerful tool for social commentary, and the intentional portrayal of Mungo as a representative of marginalized social groups provides a platform for the audience to confront prevailing stereotypes and biases. For the first time, audiences were presented with a lead character from a marginalized section of society that they could laugh *at* and laugh *with.* Additionally, associating this character’s tragic plights with lighthearted humor perhaps wrongfully lessened the seriousness of racial tensions and the guilt of hypocrisy as it undermined the devasting and inhumane nature of slavery.

The popularity of Mungo’s dialect was such that a line from the production gained widespread usage throughout the colonies: *"Whatever's to be done, Poor black must run; Mungo here, Mungo there, Mungo everywhere”* (Bickerstaff 30). The name "Mungo" evolved to symbolize not only a servant’s low social status but a racial identity in English and American society. “Mungo” even holds a position in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defined as “A black person, esp. a slave.” *The Padlock*, with its caricatured depiction of

"Mungo," not only reflected the racial attitudes prevalent during its colonial run but also laid the foundation for the evolution of blackface in American theatre—an evolution led by Hallam Jr.'s depiction and choice to run the production more than 80 times wherever he could throughout the colonies.

The American Company's production of *The Padlock* is not merely reflective of societal attitudes toward other races at the time—I argue that it also served a broader ideological purpose related to the revolution. By caricaturing Mungo as a powerless entity against a master he serves and obeys, *The Padlock* indirectly critiques systems of oppression and authoritarianism. The dynamic between Don Diego and Mungo reflects the hierarchical power structure that was seen between British colonial rulers and American colonists. Don Diego, holding the literal and figurative key to wealth and authority, exerts control over Mungo, who is marginalized by both class and otherness.

Mungo occupies a subordinate position created by an entity—Don Diego—that did not earn or deserve power but merely asserted itself as a ruling authority. Their relationship mirrors the imbalance in power between the British government and the American colonists, allowing audiences to draw parallels between the plight of powerless slaves and the perceived tyranny of the British ruling class. The association between negative depictions of black slaves and critiques of the British government stems from the parallel themes of subjugation and control.

This portrayal of Mungo not only mirrored prevalent societal attitudes toward race but also carried a deeper ideological significance. By depicting Mungo in a derogatory light, this play indirectly comments upon on the consequences of oppression and authoritarianism, particularly as they pertain to the role of the British government in

American colonists' lives. By highlighting the lowly injustices faced by Mungo and correlating them directly to his British upper-class master, the play implicitly condemns and serves as a warning against oppressive rulers for American audiences. These negative stereotypes could have served not only as a reflection of racial bias but also a commentary on the power dynamics inherent in society, particularly about the minority status of the American colonies versus the British empire.

Figure 8. "High life below the stairs, or, Mungo addressing my Lady's Maid"

Illustration of a black servant seducing a white upper-class woman as another servant looks on—both nicknamed "Mungo" in caption. Printed in 1772. Sayer, Robert. "Mixed Race Relationships." The British Museum. Accessed March 1, 2024. https://mixedmuseum.org.uk/amri-exhibition/relationships/

Political Associations of Blackface in *Othello*

By the 18th century, "Othello" in Shakespeare's *Othello* had been performed in blackface on the English stage since the 1600s. However, it was Lewis Hallam Sr. and The American Company who had brought *Othello* to America. Also performed in blackface, this production impressed Robert Dinwiddie, governor of Virginia, and established The American Company as the leading troupe in the American colonies. At the orders of Governor Dinwiddie—who had originally denied the Hallam troupe access to the theatre and caused a chaotic six-week search for a playhouse—the troupe performed *Othello* in front of a tribe of Cherokee leaders whom the governor was trying to impress during trade negotiations (Hornblow 32).

Othello explores the theme of race through the character of Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army. Othello faces racial prejudice and hatred, and his marriage to the Caucasian woman Desdemona is made complicated by his jealous advisor, Iago, who manipulates Othello into a fit of jealousy that leads to the murder of Desdemona and eventually to the end of Othello's life. At its core, *Othello* is a play about the insecurity of identity and "otherness." In the context of this thesis, we can analyze the story with a focus on the vulnerabilities of Iago, a white male protagonist, and his jealousy for Othello, the exotic "other" character who falls fatal to insecurities of his own.

This opens the discussion regarding Europe's—and eventually America's—vulnerability to foreign ideas and citizens, outsiders who were considered "English" and *not* considered "English." *Othello* ends in the downfall of Othello and Desdemona, both of whom vividly illustrate the core of racial prejudice within the play's story. In *Othello,* racial commentary is wielded both as a weapon and a tool—providing symbolism in the downfall

between white female and black male and presenting the audience a “moral lesson” on the “devastating” consequences of interracial relations.

Iago bitterly describes Othello as “an old black ram” engaging with a “white ewe” (Act 1 Scene 1) and further demonizes Othello by characterizing him as "the devil." These associations, coupled with the obvious symbolism behind the "black ram" and "white ewe," underscores Othello's exotic “otherness,” highlighting the racial disparity between him and Desdemona and reflecting the general condemnation their socially disruptive union elicited. This opens a conversation regarding racial attitudes of the time, exemplified by the fear and disapproval of interracial relationships.

Abigail Adams—considered a progressive thinker and arbiter of liberty for her time—first saw *Othello* in 1785 and was horrified that Othello, painted “blacker than any affrican,” was cast opposite a white actress in the play. Adams describes her experience in a letter to a friend:

> Whether it arises from the prejudices of Education or from a real natural antipathy I cannot determine, but my whole soul shuddered whenever I saw the sooty Moore touch the fair Desdemona.... Othello must have used Spells and magick to have won her affections... The most incomporable speech of Othellos lost half its force and Beauty, because I could not separate the colour from the Man [emphasis added]. (Adams)

While Adams may have harbored enduring racial biases, one could conjecture that her evolving sense of American identity, particularly heightened in the aftermath of the war, and the general societal attitudes toward race at the time, influenced the nature of her astonishment that elicited this reaction. Compare this with Benjamin Stillman’s letters, and the shock factor shares similarities—that both Stillman and Adams were surprised (and disgusted) by the romantic intermingling of different races reflects the society they are

surrounded by and the general cultural attitude that society deems most acceptable. Benjamin Stillman, an American science professor who traveled to London in the late 1700s, journaled about his observations in England regarding mixed-race relationships:

> An ill-dressed or starving negro is never seen in England, and in some instances even alliances are formed between them and white girls of the lower orders of society. A few days ago, I met in Oxford-street a well-dressed white girl... walking arm in arm, and conversing very sociably, with a negro man, who was as well dressed as she, and so black that his skin had a kind of ebony lustre. (Stillman)

Stillman continues, noting that he observed English-born Hindu men and women were welcomed into society, taking ranks of higher status in some industries. In these notes, Stillman reveals the deep-rooted racial prejudice tainting these observations—representing attitudes he had carried in from America:

> These young men are received into society and take the rank of their fathers. I confess the fact struck me rather unpleasantly. <u>It would seem that the prejudice against colour is less strong in England than in America</u>; for, the few negroes found in this country, are in a condition much superior to that of their countrymen anywhere else [emphasis added]. (Stillman)

In many productions, a white actor in a redcoat uniform would play "Othello" in blackface. "The tension between the estranging blackface and the familiarizing redcoat reflects 'Othello's' own struggle to square the racism of his Venetian colleagues with his desire to assimilate into their ranks" (Grossman 40). Years after this debut, Lewis Hallam Jr. cast himself as "Othello," and chose to carry the tradition of blackface in redcoat attire for an eager audience fully trusting the strength of his reputation and experience as the leading Shakespeare interpreter in the colonies.

Portraying Othello, a character of African descent, in a British redcoat outfit carries several layers of meaning and can be analyzed in connection with the propaganda efforts

of the Patriots to associate the British government with negative stereotypes. The choice of attire symbolizes Othello's alignment with the British military establishment, as the redcoat uniform was synonymous with British soldiers during that era. By dressing Othello in this manner, the production implicitly associates him with British authority and colonial power structures.

Figure 9. “Othello” portrayed as a British Redcoat at the New Strand Theatre.

Lithograph of blackface actor dressed as “Othello” and white upper class woman as “Desdemona.” Lettered, lower left: "Othello: A Gipsy woman whose name wad Powel | To my poor moder she gab dat towel.” Gear, John. “Mr. W. J. Hammond and Miss Daly as Othello and Desdemona at the New Strand Theatre.” 1836. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund. https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:25384

Furthermore, Othello's character is often portrayed as a Moorish general serving in the Venetian army in Shakespeare's play. By transposing him into a British military context, the American Company's production emphasizes his role as a representative of colonial oppression, aligning him more closely with the perceived tyranny of the British government. The decision to link Othello's racial identity with the British military apparatus serves as a potent form of propaganda for the Patriot cause. By portraying a black man—a figure already associated with negative stereotypes—donning the uniform of the colonial's oppressors, the production reinforces racial negativity while simultaneously implicating the British government in perpetuating them. This aligns with the broader propaganda efforts of the Patriots, who sought to delegitimize British rule by associating it with oppression and injustice.

Othello and *The Padlock* Comparative Analysis

The differences between England's production of *The Padlock* and *Othello* and Hallam Jr.'s American versions of them are crucial to examine in the context of the era's attitudes. In 18th-century England, there was a noticeable surge in anti-slavery sentiment and an expanding population advocating for abolitionism. Audiences witnessed a rise of the abolitionist movement spearheaded by figures like William Wilberforce, who tirelessly campaigned against the transatlantic slave trade (Baker 433). This movement gained momentum and led to the eventual passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, which prohibited the slave market in the British Empire. Consequently, there was a discernible shift in public opinion toward a more progressive and humanitarian stance on racial issues (Baker). However, it is imperative to acknowledge that despite the ascendance of anti-

slavery sentiments, England still contended with lingering prejudice and instances of racial abuse. While evolving attitudes signaled a gradual shift toward tolerance, the complete eradication of discriminatory practices remained an unrealized goal.

In contrast, Hallam Jr.'s American renditions of *The Padlock* and *Othello* unfolded against a backdrop characterized by markedly different racial dynamics. In the United States during the same timeframe, slavery was deeply entrenched in the socio-economic fabric, particularly in the Southern colonies. Unlike England, where anti-slavery sentiments were gaining momentum, the colonies grappled with the enduring institution of slavery, resulting in distinctly disparate perspectives on race. If we interpret *The Padlock* in the context of American slavery, it is clear to see that the North American version of the production focuses on the dynamic between Don Diego and Mungo.

By the time *The Padlock* was produced by the American Company in 1769, Lewis Hallam Jr. was well-respected and quickly becoming the leading director and actor in the monopoly-driven theatre world. The fact that he chose to produce *The Padlock* most likely was due to its immediate success and popularity in London. But the difference between England's productions of *The Padlock* and Hallam Jr.'s American production—and personal interpretation—of it, is based on each country's respective attitudes about race. The point of view of the respective productions in each country are reflective of the country's attitudes toward race at the time.

The examination of *The Padlock* and *Othello* underscores the cultural and societal dissonance in attitudes towards race between England and the United States during their respective historical epochs. England, propelled by a burgeoning anti-slavery movement, demonstrated a more progressive trajectory in addressing racial issues. In contrast, the

American colonies, ensnared in the complexities of slavery, presented a divergent and less forward-looking perspective. Scrutinizing these differences provides a nuanced comprehension of how theatrical interpretations reflected and, in turn, shaped societal attitudes towards race within their distinct cultural milieus. Most significantly, Hallam Jr.'s popular "Mungo" character was what influenced future American actors to follow suit (Tosches 10). This character paved a path in the colonies for other actors to comfortably don blackface and perform minstrel shows that audiences began to expect and demand.

Furthermore, both productions functioned as platforms for political and social commentary. The unfavorable depiction of Mungo in *The Padlock* went beyond mere racial bias; it also represented symbols of subjugation and control in the form of the British elite, entwining racial stereotypes with broader socio-political commentary. The association between negative depictions of black slaves and critiques of the British government stems from the parallel themes of subjugation and control. Just as Mungo is depicted as subjected to the whims of his master, the British government was often portrayed in revolutionary propaganda as imposing its will upon its subjects.

This narrative also allowed audiences to draw parallels between the plight of minority status and the perceived tyranny of the British ruling class. The portrayal of Othello in a redcoat outfit in an 18th-century colonial American theatre production can be analyzed as a deliberate attempt to connect negative racial associations with the propaganda agenda of the Patriots. Mungo is depicted as subservient to his masters' whims, just as the British government was often portrayed as imposing its authority on its populace, both within its borders and across its colonial holdings. This narrative enabled audiences to draw parallels between the plight of black slaves and the perceived tyranny of the British

ruling elite. By leveraging theatrical symbolism, these productions reinforced stereotypes while advancing a political message that vilified the British government and its control over the New World.

Symbols of Independence in *The Merchant of Venice*

American theatre was a male-dominated institution by the end of the eighteenth century. In England, female playwrights and actresses had made significant progress in gaining respect in theatre, but the American theatre scene was still finding its footing, slow to create a favorable foundation for women (Dudden 206). One of the reasons behind the slow progress for women in the theatre was a general attitude in Puritan-dominated colonies that "public women"—women who performed or showed their (clothed) bodies to an audience in public—were similar in class to prostitutes (Stoner 104). "Respectable women did attend, but not on their own, not regularly, and not in great numbers" (Butsch 381). In the early republic, the exclusion of women from engaging in the public sphere deprived them of opportunities to partake in significant political expressions within venues like taverns, halls, and street parades. Additionally, theaters served as political arenas until the mid-century, where certain establishments aligned themselves with either the Federalist or Republican ideologies. Within these theatrical spaces, audiences engaged in confrontations with actors and among themselves, fueled by perceived affiliations with one political party or the other (Butsch).

Furthermore, within the legal framework of the American colonies in the 18th century, married women were ensnared in the principles of "coverture," a legal doctrine that negated their independent civic standing. Under this, the husband assumed the role of representing his wife externally, dictating her employment, bodily autonomy, political

decisions, and control over any property she brought into the marriage (Skemp). While men were responsible for showing loyalty to their government, a woman's loyalty was directed towards her husband and his political stances, rather than toward the state. Since property ownership was a pivotal requirement for political rights at the time, the absence of property equated to a lack of political presence for women (Skemp).

In *Merchant of Venice,* Portia's cross-dressing scene most famously provides the opportunity for a "breeches role," which was the term used to describe a woman wearing pants, acting as a boy or man. This provided Elizabeth Hallam, the oldest Hallam daughter, the liberation to wear knee-length breeches, which was "thrilling for the men and inspiring for the women" (Grossman 40). In the era of fictional Portia, societal conventions prescribed that women embrace submissive, domestic roles and adhere to established gender norms. As presented in the 1752 production during Elizabeth Hallam's "breeches" role:

> Nerissa and Portia are aware that men are perceived as superior, but that does not prevent them from pursuing their purposes. The two courageously took on men's roles and exercised masculinity disguised in men's attires in the courtroom, and successfully emerged victorious in Antonio's case. (Shahwan 162)

By adopting a male guise, the character of Portia not only broke through these conventions but also stepped into the traditionally male-dominated arena of the legal and judicial system. By choosing to depict a woman with agency, intelligence, and independence, *The Merchant of Venice* disrupts anticipated societal expectations and as a result, audiences are encouraged to understand women as resilient individuals who actively defy the notion of women merely being possessions in society.

Jessica, Shylock's daughter, presents an additional layer of complexity to established roles and societal expectations placed on women during the era. Initially tethered to her Jewish father, like most women were tethered to the paternal role in their households, she ultimately elopes with Lorenzo, boldly challenging the dominance of the predominant male figure in her life to affirm her autonomy—an exceptionally unconventional action in her era. Her declaration, "I am a daughter to his blood; I am not to his manners" (Act 2 Scene 3), underscores her determination to break free from traditional constraints and assert her independence.

> The women in *The Merchant of Venice* possess well-discerning capabilities despite male prejudice and conformity to Elizabethan gender stereotypes. Portia often portrays powerful eloquent characteristics concerned with gender issues and approaches life from a distinctly feminist viewpoint. (Calvo 51)

The significance of these characters—and the Hallams' choice to present them as unadulteratedly clever and independent—lies not only in their individual narratives but in their collective representation of women who transcend the constraints of their time. The portrayal of these characters challenges the audience to reconsider preconceived notions about women's roles and capabilities, paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in both the literary and historical contexts of the play. In this sense, the three strong female characters in "The Merchant of Venice" not only contribute to the richness of the narrative but also serve as enduring symbols of resilience and empowerment, transcending the limitations of their Elizabethan origins.

Far from being portrayed as inactive possessions, Portia's intelligence and legal acumen and Jessica's defiance of her father and decision to elope with Lorenzo illustrate a desire for—and ability to get—individual liberty and autonomy, echoing the aspirations

of colonists seeking liberation from British rule. In essence, the groundbreaking roles of these independent women in *The Merchant of Venice* can be interpreted as symbolic of the broader themes of empowerment, autonomy, and liberation that underpinned the American Revolution. Through their agency, Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica embody the revolutionary ideals of challenging traditional authority, asserting individual rights, and forging a path toward a new and independent future.

Figure 10. "Portia" disguised as a male lawyer in *The Merchant of Venice*.

"Era," a watercolor portrait of a fierce looking Portia dressed as a lawyer in a courtroom filled with men. Signed and dated 1893. Smetham-Jones, William. "Portia in The Merchant of Venice:" Victorian Web. Accessed March 29, 2024. https://victorianweb.org/victorian/painting/misc/smethamjones.html

Women's Empowerment in *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret*

> Inis: "For goodness sake, madam, where are you going in this pet."
>
> Isabella: "Anywhere to avoid matrimony. The thought of a husband is as terrible to me as the sight of a hobgoblin."
>
> (*The Wonder* Act 1)

Another politically laced play debuted by The American Company in 1759 was the wildly popular comedy *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714), written by the most successful female playwright of the 18th century, British actress and poet Susanna Centlivre. The first play to be produced in America that centered around female leads and female-driven plotlines, *The Wonder* is a significant cultural artifact that contributed to guiding attitudes toward women's rights of the era (Sarkela). While direct evidence of its impact is challenging to ascertain, analyzing the play within the context of 18th-century America allows for an exploration of its influence on colonial theatre audiences.

Taking place in Lisbon, the narrative intertwines two romantic entanglements, both centered on a singular "secret." The protagonist, Violante, hides her closest companion, Isabella, who is the sister of Violante's lover, Don Felix. Isabella's father, motivated to marry his daughter off to a wealthy yet ailing old merchant, remains oblivious to this clandestine arrangement. *The Wonder* engages in themes of female agency and resistance against patriarchal control. It also provides a lens through which audiences could reflect on prevailing attitudes toward women of the era—a birds-eye perspective of female struggles and desires. "Violante" navigates a complex romantic situation and challenges male authority, behavior that becomes a focal point for the discussion of women's autonomy and ability to resist traditional gender role constraints. Isabella revolts against the institution of marriage, comparing "wives" to "slaves":

> Isabella: Ah, Inis! What peasant lives women lead in England, where duty wears no fetter but inclination! The custom of our country enslaves us from our very cradles, first to our parents, next to our husbands, and when Heaven is so kind to rid us of both these, our brothers still usurp authority, and expect a blind obedience from us; so that maids, wives, and widows, we are litter better than slaves to the tyrant, man. (Act I)

In 18th-century England and America, societal norms regarding women's roles were largely defined by traditional domestic expectations, emphasizing submissiveness to the household leader and expected adherence to familial and marital duties (Sarkela). Featuring heroines who defy these norms prompts audiences to question and contemplate the limitations placed on women. The clandestine nature of Violante's actions, driven by her commitment to protect Isabella from a forced marriage, reflects a rebellion not just against marriage but against societal rules. Isabella's description of her father's dominance harkens to similar images used by "Mungo" describing his chained existence in *The Padlock:* "Upon my refusing to obey him, he lock'd me into my chamber, vowing to keep me there till he arriv'd and force me to consent." (Act II)

Furthermore, Isabella's voicing of this patriarchal abuse is a symbolic expression of the dire state of female autonomy at the time. The uniqueness of this play is in Centlivre's unconventional depiction of women characterized by strength and intelligence, and in placing women prominently at the forefront of the comedic drama. Also unique is the thematic emphasis placed on female agency and intelligence, as exemplified through rebellious female leads, which serves as a deliberate departure from conventional narrative expectations of the period. The camaraderie and solidarity between Isabella and Violante reflect themes of cooperation and unity that resonate with the spirit of collaboration and collective action characterized in the American Revolution.

Their union of minds and strategy reflects the colonists coming together to pursue common goals of liberty and self-determination.

But to fully grasp the uniqueness of this play for American audiences, it is essential to consider it in the context of the colonies' attitudes toward women's roles in society and governance. For one example, in March of 1776, as the impending signing of the Declaration of Independence loomed, Abigail Adams provided counsel to her husband, John Adams, who was then serving in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. In her correspondence, she urged him to "Remember the Ladies" in the formulation of the forthcoming "new Code of Laws," for "all Men would be tyrants if they could" (Norton 7). To translate, Abigail Adams was advocating for a reform of the common marriage law that subjugated wives by placing their property under the absolute control of their husbands (Norton 8). John Adams responded to his wife's plea with a tone of disdain, drawing a parallel between her request and the perceived disobedience among children and slaves of the time.

Figure 11. Gender power dynamics at play in *The Wonder.*

Print depicting Mrs. Barry and[David] Garrick in the characters of Donna Violante and Don Felix in Susanna Centlivre's The Wonder. Printed 1769. Smith, J. "Mrs. Barry & Mr. Garrick." Victoria and Albert Museum Collections. Accessed February 2, 2024. https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1257426/mrs-barry-and-mr-garrick-print-j-smith/

This brief exchange encapsulates a poignant moment in the dialogue of women's rights during the American Revolution. Abigail Adams, while recognizing the impending push for independence, sought to extend the discourse to include the rights and status of women within the emerging legal framework. John Adams' dismissiveness underscores the prevailing challenges faced in advancing the cause of women's rights, even within the

context of a revolutionary era marked by calls for liberty and equality. The exchange between husband-and-wife sheds light on the limitations that women had on discussions of gender equality in the nascent American republic. However, this only pushed women further into the realm of the theatre, as entertainment and satire became the only public venue in which to voice their political opinions.

Sandra Sarkela's *Freedom's Call: The Persuasive Power of Mercy Otis Warren's Dramatic Sketche*s highlights the rhetorical power of Patriot playwright Mercy Otis Warren's satirical works and focuses on "how Warren's appropriation of the dramatic form advanced a radical narrative that mobilized support for their cause." Sarkela distinguishes Mercy Otis Warren's plays as a dramatic art form rather than "political propaganda," and argues that their rhetorical merit made a major impact on the population of Boston as they were published in newspapers that were accessible to the whole town.

Mercy Otis Warren's stirring letter to friend Hannah Winthrop further reflects the nature of her desire for more independence to express political thought in light of the alarming developments around her:

> When I took up my pen I determined to leave the field of politicks to those whose proper busines it is to speculate and to act at this important crisis; but the occurrences that have lately taken place are so alarming...as to command the attention of the mother and the wife...
>
> Much interested in the success of the conflict — I feel myself unequal to the combat yet hope the women will never get the better of that disinterested regard to universal happiness which ought to actuate the benevolent mind [emphasis added]...nor shall I make an apology for touching on a subject a little out of the line of female attention,... (Warren)

The absence of voting rights for women meant that their direct participation in the political process was non-existent. Consequently, the idea of women holding public office

was considered a radical departure from established norms, challenging the deeply ingrained gender hierarchy. Even the progressive and liberty-loving Thomas Jefferson demonstrated apprehension for this concept, writing "The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor I." While his concerns address societal readiness for such a transformative shift, the term "innovation" in his statement suggests this to be a completely new idea, with a perceived need for gradual societal adaptation to it.

This statement also reflects an acknowledgment of the entrenched gender biases and societal resistance that would likely accompany such a departure from tradition. Thomas Jefferson's reluctance to entertain the idea of women holding political office provides valuable insights into the gender dynamics of his time. Understanding this perspective requires an appreciation of the historical context, societal norms, and the limited political agency afforded to women. Analyzing such statements through a critical lens facilitates a nuanced understanding of the challenges and resistance faced by women seeking political participation in earlier periods of history.

Portia, Jessica, Nerissa, Isabella, and Violante represent the portrayal of female characters that offer audiences a glimpse into *alternate* narratives, inspiring the imagination to consider, for example, the "What if?" in "What if women could defend men in the courtroom?" "What if women's lives were not centered around marriage?" "What if cultural narratives celebrated female resilience and strength over beauty and physical appearance?" As each character defies societal expectations by engaging in unconventional behavior, they provoke thought and discussion regarding the limitations imposed on women. Scholar Sheila Skemp argues that by broadening the definition of "the political"

to considering the social and sexual aspects of colonial life—art, culture, writing, childbearing, child-rearing—it is impossible to ignore the "political" influence women had on the time. By examining family structure and domestic lifestyle as a "microcosmic representation of 'the state'" (Harris), women had their symbolic system of government to be concerned about and vocalized these concerns in the ways that they were able to.

> They read, they wrote, they published, they formed literary societies, improving their own lives as well as the lives of less fortunate members of society.... If, as feminists in the 1970s argued, "the personal is political," then these women were acting politically. (Skemp)

For actresses like Nancy Hallam and female playwrights like Susanna Centlivre, the stage developed into a platform for the exploration of gender roles and the limitations of female ability. Through theatrical expression, women were finally able to contribute to a dialogue about the governance of their own lives, challenging and reshaping societal perceptions through radically bold and opinionated characters. While *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Wonder* may not explicitly champion women's rights, their representation of symbolic themes may have indirectly prompted certain women—such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren—to contemplate their situations, playing a role, to some extent, in a more extensive cultural transformation that laid the groundwork for conversations about women's rights and equality in subsequent years.

Soon after the theatre ban was lifted from the colonies in 1792, a surge of female playwrights hit the American theatre scene. Sandra Sarkela asserts that female playwrights who viewed playwriting as their sole avenue for political expression drew significant inspiration from the prominent events of London's progressivism. Sara Lampert argues that the expansion of theatre in America was driven by the appearance of women onstage. Actresses—such as Nancy Hallam—and female playwrights—such as

Mercy Otis Warren—attained celebrity status primarily through word of mouth. This development of the "celebrity" played a crucial role in the growth of American theatre in the colonies as more and more women found in theatre an avenue for their political and social opinions (Sarkela).

Women's roles in American theatre, both on and off the stage, became avenues to voice their concerns about the systems governing their lives. Thus, we can conclude that since not many "respectable" women attended American theatre until the late 1800s, and most of the playhouses were filled with a male audience, the findings in my analysis are that these plays influenced American society by inspiring a sudden rise in American female playwrights. Following the bold paths forged before them by playwrights such as Susanna Centlivre, these plays taught women that the stage was an effective public place for their voices to be heard. This assertion of agency parallels the revolutionary spirit of American colonists who sought to break free from the constraints of British rule and assert their equality as humans no matter what status, and their autonomy as citizens no matter what country.

Conclusion

Historians have yet to unearth evidence regarding the personal political opinions of Lewis Hallam Sr., Lewis Hallam Jr., or David Douglass, but it is enough to examine their actions and conclude that the plays they produced in the colonies—as examined in this thesis—leaned decidedly toward pro-patriot ideology. The American Company put on several anti-crown productions, changed their name from the "London Company of Comedians" to "The American Company," as well as infused otherwise neutral performances with politically relevant content, as evidenced by incorporating a prologue alluding to "the sweets of Liberty" in a Philadelphia rendition of *Hamlet* in 1773 (the year of the Boston Tea Party). Some scholars argue that the actors' and producers' political loyalties were "flexible" and catered to the audience's political tides rather than the other way around. But in this thesis, I have argued that of the hundreds of pro-England plays that the American Company could have produced, they instead chose plays with specific pro-liberty and pro-Whig messaging, and this is evidence that their loyalties were for the revolutionary cause.

The retrospective exploration of 18th-century theatrical productions unveils intricate intersections between theatre, social dynamics, and the vulnerabilities for propaganda and political motivations associated with monopolistic control. Political messages embedded in plays like *Cato, The Wonder,* and *Julius Caesar* serve as a reminder of theatre's historical potency as a political tool. The ability theatrical productions have to shape societal narratives and influence public opinion is evident in the historical evidence of political leaders finding inspiration in these performances.

Negative Contemporary Implications

The American Company's monopoly in the colonies reflects an artistic monopoly active in America today: the Hollywood studio system. This system is marked by the concentration of power among a few major companies, such as Warner Bros. Pictures, 20th Century Fox, and Universal Pictures. Their control over production and distribution creates an imbalance in negotiating power between studios, artists, and the industry labor unions. As proven in recent upheavals, imbalances such as these can lead to contentious labor disputes for the working class. From July 14 to November 9, 2023, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) initiated a strike in response to a labor dispute with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). This marked the lengthiest strike in the history of SAG-AFTRA, and its confluence with the 2023 Writers Guild of America strike resulted in a substantial impact, causing the loss of 45,000 jobs and an estimated economic setback of $6.5 billion for Southern California. The SAG-AFTRA strike and its subsequent impact on jobs and the economy can be analyzed in the context of the broader dynamics of the Hollywood film industry, which is characterized by the dominance of a few major film studios. This raises concerns about the monopolistic control exerted by these industry giants and the potential for subjective narratives to dominate the cultural discourse, limiting the diversity of voices and perspectives.

Positive Contemporary Implications

The study of the American Company's 18th-century monopoly on theatre illustrates two points: 1) that artistic monopolies affect the political inclinations of audiences and leaders, and 2) that propagandistic messaging in theatre is a powerful tool but *can* be used for positive social change. Indeed, politically influenced art doesn't always have to be

harmful. When used thoughtfully, it can serve several purposes and contribute to the richness of intellectual expression and societal discourse.

Considering the historical impact of The American Company, anti-theatre laws, and the contemporary challenges related to monopolies in theatre and film, here are some considerations on how political messaging can shape theatre and film in valuable ways: 1) As a catalyst for debate and reflection—sparking hard conversations and controversial issues can prompt audiences to reflect on different perspectives and foster critical dialogue. 2) As a social megaphone to represent marginalized voices, as it did for 18th-century women in the American colonies. 3) As a way to shine the spotlight on under-considered and under-empathized topics. Stories with political agendas can inspire citizens to *engage* by highlighting issues that demand attention.

The notion of theatrical monopolies, as exemplified by the Hallam Family's influence on theatre in the 18th century, resonates with contemporary concerns surrounding the Hollywood film industry or New York's Broadway scene. Analogous to the Hallam Family's sway over theatrical productions, these modern monopolies wield considerable influence over today's cultural landscape, and the consequence of that lies in the potential infiltration of political beliefs into productions. As we have learned through the American Company's productions—there can be danger in portraying certain societal attitudes through degrading characters (such as the negative portrayals of race in *The Padlock*). But positive consequences can come from plays with political agendas, as they present the opportunity to inspire action in audiences for political change.

Consider the political messaging found in plays produced in the last century. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, set against the backdrop of the Salem witch trials, stands as a

compelling allegory for the McCarthyism era and the Red Scare of 1950s America. Miller ingeniously utilizes this historical milieu to illuminate the perils of mass hysteria, fear-driven propaganda, and the gradual erosion of civil liberties during times of political paranoia. Through skillful storytelling, *The Crucible* not only draws parallels between past and present but also compels audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the fragility of society. By shedding light on these themes, Miller's work prompts viewers to reflect on their involvement in perpetuating systems of injustice and oppression.

The Laramie Project, by Moises Kaufman, based on the aftermath of the brutal murder of a young gay man Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, serves as a poignant exploration of hate crime, homophobia, and the resilience of communities in the face of tragedy. It also stands as a powerful testament to the impact of political influence over plays in advancing society's understanding of and attitudes toward uncomfortable and rarely addressed topics. By shining a spotlight on Shepard's story and its broader implications, the play has inspired activism and mobilized support for measures to combat hate crimes and promote freedom and equality.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* delves deeply into political themes by chronicling the life of Alexander Hamilton and the founding of the United States. Exploring the fraught dynamics of governance and nation-building, *Hamilton* offers a nuanced examination of the ideals and contradictions of American democracy, inviting audiences to engage critically with the nation's political legacy. By humanizing historical figures such as Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and Thomas Jefferson, the play invites audiences to understand the founding fathers as complex individuals with hopes, fears, and flaws. In

doing so, the play challenges simplistic notions of heroism and villainy, encouraging viewers to empathize with the motivations and perspectives of its characters.

These are only a few examples of plays today that demonstrate the transformative power of political theater in shaping societal attitudes and advancing ideals. By engaging with controversial topics and challenging established norms, as plays like *Cato* and *The Wonder* did, political plays contribute to the building of empathy, critical thinking, and historical perspective, ultimately fostering a generation protective of its future.

In a wonderful collection of theatre reviews entitled *The Dawning of the American Drama*, one excerpt stood out for speaking on the benefits and "morality" of theatre—not a common American 18th-century sentiment. The rhetoric is beautiful, and describes the power of theatre in one of the best ways I have found yet:

> Plays are pictures of the world, and the world abounds with error and vice... books and secondhand information are tedious, cumbrous, and delusive mediums; but here we may examine for ourselves [emphasis added]; we may come in contact with vice, as it were, without danger of infection; and the impressions that are made are eminently forcible and vivid. It is evidence, therefore, that theatrical establishments are useful to the wise. (Wolter 37)

This insightful perspective sheds light on the enduring power of the performing arts. The assertion that plays serve as "pictures of the world" aligns with the idea that theatre has the unique ability to reflect and mirror the complexities of the human experience. Stories we tell on stage provide what's real and immediate, report the concerns and issues of our day, and allow artists to communicate the unfolding of life's narratives to a dark room of strangers we would have never met without a spotlight. The notion that theatre enables individuals to "come in contact with vice" without the danger of infection

underscores its role as a safe yet powerful space for learning about other human experiences impossible to experience in one lifetime.

As the Hallam family proved by bravely donning stage masks and swords in support of America's independence, theatre can serve as a powerful call to action, a compass for morality, and a road to the exploration of ethical challenges we may have never taken on our own. This artistic force should never be stifled by government or corporate monopoly, but given wings, encouraged to sweep like wildfire through society's ever-growing forest. May today's actors, writers, and producers find, as the trailblazers of The American Company did, the stories that must be told—and tell them. It is worth it, if only for the chance that there is one young voice in the audience, sitting in the dark, listening for a sign to sing out for liberty.

Appendix

The American Company's repertoire includes a mix of Shakespearean classics and popular British and international plays:

1752-54:

1. *The Merchant of Venice, Lethe,* and/or *The Anatomist* (9/15/52)
2. *Othello* (11/9/52)
3. *Damon and Phillada* (9/15/53)
4. *The Conscious Lovers* (9/17/53)
5. *Tunbridge Walks* (9/24/53)
6. *The Constant Couple* (10/1/53)
7. *Virgin Unmasked* (10/8/53)
8. *Love for Love* (10/22/53)
9. *Tom Thumb* (10/22/53)
10. *George Barnwell* (10/29/53)
11. *Lying Valet* (10/29/53)
12. *The Distrest Mother* (11/5/53)
13. *Hob in the Well* (11/5/53)
14. *Richard III* (11/12/53)
15. *The Devil to Pay* (11/12/53)
16. *The Beggar's Opera* (11/19/53)
17. *The Committee* (11/26/53)
18. *The Spanish Fryar* (11/30/53)
19. *The Careless Husband* (12/3/53)
20. *Beaux Stratagem* (12/10/53)
21. *Harlequin Collector* (12/10/53)
22. *Miss in Her Teens* (12/17/53)
23. *The Fair Penitent* (12/17/53)
24. *The Twin Rivals* (12/26/53)
25. *The Drummer* (1/7/54)
26. *King Lear* (1/14/54)
27. *Woman Is a Riddle* (1/21/54)
28. *Romeo and Juliet* (1/28/54)
29. *The Gamester* (2/4/54)
30. *The Earl of Essex* (2/11/54)
31. *The Miller of Mansfield* (2/11/54)
32. *The Suspicious Husband* (2/18/54)
33. *Harlequin Skeleton* (2/15/54)
34. *The Albion Queens* (2/25/54)
35. *The Virgin Unmasked* (2/25/54)
36. *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (3/4/54)
37. *The Stagecoach* (3/11/54)

38. *Tamerlane* (6/12/54)
39. *A Wife Well Managed* (6/12/54)
40. *The Provok'd Husband* (6/24/54)
41. *The Orphan* (?/54)
42. *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (?/54)
43. *Cato* (11/6/54)
44. *The Recruiting Officer* (11/13/54)

1759-60:

1. *The Inconstant* (1/1/59)
2. *The Mock Doctor* (1/1/60)
3. *Lovers' Quarrels* (1/8/60)
4. *Venice Preserved* (1/15/60)
5. *Douglas* (1/24/60)
6. *Honest Yorkshireman* (7/6/60)
7. *Adventures of Half an Hour* (7/20/60)
8. *Hamlet* (7/27/60)
9. *Theodosius* (8/10/60)
10. *The School Boy* (8/31/60)
11. *The Toy Shop* (10/5/60)
12. *Macbeth* (10/26/60)
13. *The Busybody* (3/24/60)
14. *The Revenge* (3/27/60)
15. 1761-66: *Henry IV, Part 1* (12/18/61)
16. *The Mourning Bride* (12/22/63)
17. *The Jealous Wife* (3/17/64)
18. *The Orphan of China* (3/26/64)
19. *A Wonder, A Woman Keeps a Secret* (4/25)
20. *Love in a Village* (2/10/66)
21. *The Way to Keep Him* (3/20/66)
22. *The School for Lovers* (4/3/66)
23. *Catherine and Petruchio* (11/21/66)
24. *The Old Maid* (11/28/66)
25. *The Oracle* (12/5/66)

1767:

26. *The Upholsterer* (1/23)
27. *High Life below Stairs* (1/26)
28. *The Citizen* (1/30)
29. *The Reprisal* (2/2)
30. *The Miser* (2/9)
31. *Thomas and Sally* (2/20)
32. *The Mayor of Garratt* (2/23)
33. *All for Love* (3/9)

34. *Love Makes a Man* (3/14)
35. *The Deuce in Him* (3/14)
36. *The Brave Irishman* (3/17)
37. *The Witches: A Pantomime* (4/2)
38. *The Contrivances* (4/20)
39. *The Prince of Parthia* (4/24)
40. *The Apprentice* (5/4)
41. *A Picture of a Playhouse* (5/11)
42. *The Spirit of Contradiction* (5/11)
43. *Don Quixote in England* (5/21)
44. *Cymbeline* (5/25)
45. *The Country Lasses* (6/4)
46. *The Chaplet* (6/4)
47. *Coriolanus* (6/8)
48. *Neck or Nothing* (6/12)
49. *Double Disappointment* (6/15)
50. *The Roman Father* (6/18)
51. *Harlequin Restored* (10/9)
52. *The Clandestine Marriage* (11/19)
53. 1768: *All in the Wrong* (4/6)
54. *Polly Honeycomb* (4/21)
55. *Taste, an interlude* (5/2)
56. *Love à la Mode* (5/13)
57. *Cock-Lane Ghost* (6/2)
58. *King John* (12/12)
59. *False Delicacy* (12/16)
60. *Zara* (12/26)
61. *Alexander the Great* (12/30)
62. "Dissertation upon Noses" (12/30)
63. 1769: *The Guardian* (2/2)
64. *The English Merchant* (2/6)
65. *Every Man in His Humour* (2/20)
66. *The Tender Husband* (3/25)
67. *The Musical Lady* (4/3)
68. *The Maid of the Milk* (5/4)
69. *Padlock* (5/29)
70. *Midas* (11/24)
71. *The Siege of Damascus* (12/19)
72. 1770: *The Tempest* (1/19)
73. *Neptune and Amphitrite* (1/19)
74. *Edward: The Black Prince* (2/6)
75. *The Funeral* (2/9)
76. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (3/2)
77. *Comus* (3/9)
78. *The Good-Natured Man* (5/3)
79. *Wits Last Stake* (5/10)

80. *Julius Caesar* (6/1)
81. 1771: *The Brothers* (3/?)
82. *A School for Libertines; or, A Word to the Wise* (3/26)
83. *The West Indian* (10/23)
84. 1772: *The Fashionable Lover* (11/30)
85. *Lionel and Clarissa* (12/14)
86. 1773: *Englishman in Paris* (1/20)
87. *Edgar and Emmaline* (12/15)
88. *The Conquest of Canada* (2/17)
89. *Cymon* (3/3)
90. *The Register Office* (3/29)
91. *Cross Purposes* (5/28)
92. *The Irish Widow* (6/28)
93. *She Stoops to Conquer* (8/2)
94. 1774: *School for Fathers* (3/4)
95. *Young America in London* (4/22)

1785 (At New York's John Street Theatre):

1. *Touchstone; or Harlequin Traveler* (9/1)
2. *Flitch of Bacon* (9/27)
3. *Elopement,* pantomime (9/30)
4. *The Poor Soldier* (12/2)
5. *Sir Thomas Overbury* (12/26)

1786:

1. *The Benevolent Merchant* (1/6)
2. *Robinson Crusoe* (1/11)
3. *More Ways Than One* (3/6)
4. *Rosina* (4/19)
5. *Harlequin's Invasion* and *As You Like It* (7/14)

1787:

1. *Agreeable Surprise* (1/27)
2. *Harlequin's Frolic* (1/31)
3. *Much Ado about Nothing* (3/19)
4. *The Widow's Vow* (3/23)
5. *Love in a Camp* (4/13)
6. *The Contrast* (4/16)
7. *The Deaf Lover* (5/7)
8. *The School for Wives* (5/8)
9. *May Day* (5/19)
10. *All in the Wrong* (5/23)
11. *Selima and Azor* (6/1)

12. *The Deserter* (6/8)
13. *The Mysterious Husband* (12/21)
14. 1788: *The First Floor* (2/6)
15. *The Madcap* (2/11)
16. *The Heiress* (2/25)
17. *Convention; or, Columbian Father* (4/7)
18. *The Castle of Andalusia* (4/21)
19. *True Blue* (4/24)
20. 1789: *Who's the Dupe?* (6/12)
21. *He Would Be a Soldier* (6/22)
22. *Inkle and Yarico* (7/1)
23. *The Father* (7/7)
24. *Like Master, Like Man* (9/9)
25. *Dead Alive* (9/24)
26. *All's Well That Ends Well* (10/1)
27. *Duplicity* (10/9)
28. *The Critic* (10/12)
29. *Cheats of Scapin* (10/19)
30. *Gustavus Vasa* (10/22)
31. *The Fair American* (11/9)
32. *Invasion* (11/13)
33. *Wapping Landlady* (11/16)
34. *The Toy* (11/24)
35. *Darby's Return* (11/24)
36. *Prisoner at Large* (11/28)
37. 1790: *The Wrangling Lovers* (2/26)
38. *The Widow of Malabar* (5/7)
39. *Half an Hour after Supper* (5/17)
40. *All the World's a Stage* (5/17)
41. *Shakespeare Jubilee* (6/3)
42. *Harlequin Cook* (6/10)
43. *Patie and Roger* (7/1)

1791:

1. *Seeing's Believing* (3/11)
2. *The Recess* (4/27)
3. *The Dramatist* (5/2)
4. *Death of Harlequin* (5/19)
5. *As It Should Be* (5/19)
6. *Little Hunchback* (5/27)
7. *Harlequin Shipwrecked* (6/13)
8. *The Rival Candidates* (6/13)
9. *Constitutional Follies* (6/30)
10. *Birth of Harlequin* (7/7)

11. *Divorce* (11/28)

1792:

1. *King of the Genii* (1/2)
2. *The Bird Catcher,* ballet (1/25)
3. *Two Philosophers,* ballet (2/3)
4. *Return of the Laborers,* ballet, and *Harlequin Wood Cutter,* ballet (2/10)
5. *The Restoration of Harlequin* (2/13)
6. *La Belle Dorothee,* ballet (2/17)
7. *Columbine Invisible,* ballet (2/24)
8. *Silver Rock* (3/26)
9. *Yorker's Stratagem* (4/24)
10. *Harlequin Balloonist,* ballet (5/3)
11. *The New Peerage* (5/8)
12. *Enchanted Nosegay,* ballet (6/5)
13. *Merry Girl* (6/7)
14. *Harlequin Tobacconist,* ballet (6/20)

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