

INTRODUCTION



Royall Tyler

(1757-1826)

Royall Tyler wrote the first literary American play after graduating from Harvard and serving in the American Revolution. *The Contrast* is a comedy produced in New York City in 1787, contrasting American with European manners and cultures, originating the “international theme” that was to be prominent later in the work of Henry James and Mark Twain. Yankees appear in comic roles speaking an authentic dialect and the prologue calls for Americans to stop looking abroad for culture and to create their own. The argument was made later by poet William Cullen Bryant in the *North American Review* (1819) and was the inspirational theme of Ralph Waldo Emerson in his influential address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard, “The American Scholar” (1837), called by Oliver Wendell Holmes “our intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

Tyler also wrote another comedy, as well as verses, columns and novels, most notably *The Algerine Captive* (1797): The narrator, Dr. Updike Underhill, is a traveler who is taken into captivity as a slave in Algiers, then returns to America and denounces the miserable treatment of all such prisoners. Tyler satirizes slavery, quack medicine and college education in New England. In his preface he urges the production of native fiction to meet an increasing demand for novels in America, a call answered by Charles Brockden Brown in *Wieland* (1798).

Michael Hollister (2015)

COMMENTARY

The Contrast (1787)

“By the time Royall Tyler wrote *The Contrast*, the nation had emerged as an independent political unit; but its social pattern was still equivocal. *The Contrast*, the first American comedy to be presented in America, was performed at the John Street Theater in New York on April 16, 1787. It was and is an excellent acting-play. Its universally interesting theme of urban sophistication vs. rural naivete had a peculiarly appropriate application in post-Revolutionary America, when the British, having lost political control, were still able to patronize us culturally.

The central situation in *The Contrast* shows an English cad maneuvering for the hand of a pure American girl while at the same time he is making dishonorable overtures to another intended as a ‘companion’ to his wife. Of course he loses out ignominiously. The characterization of the ‘fashionable’ elements in the dramatis personae is done with the authentic tone of a writer who knew his Sheridan--for

The Contrast has much in common with *The School for Scandal*--but the prologue sounded a national note that was well sustained:

Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam
When each refinement may be found at home?

Patriotism was further emphasized when 'Yankee Doodle' was sung during the performance. Beyond this, the action was made interesting to Americans by local references and the celebration of the American character. Colonel Manley's success in breaking up a sinister stratagem (and in his suit of the young lady he has saved from a Chesterfieldian fop) constitutes an endorsement of the American way of life in 1787. Our own social institutions must set the standards of individual behavior.

The success of *The Contrast* on the stage was probably due also to the adroitness with which Tyler manages his dialogue and to the introduction, for the first time on the American stage, of a fine example of Yankee rustic, Jonathan, whose combination of sturdy, though not inflexible, New England morality and childlike innocence makes for a rollicking comedy, especially the scene in which he unwittingly attends a theater and tries to carry out the foreign servant's instructions as to how to succeed in an amour. The play scene is almost worthy of Fielding, whose Partridge is a literary cousin of Jonathan. Jonathan's attempted amour ends in a rebuff which helps to clarify his thinking: 'If this is the way with your city ladies, give me the twenty acres of rock, the Bible, the cow, and Tabitha, and a little peaceabler bundling.'

The Contrast was a lusty embodiment of American ideals in a play which, without pointedly ignoring English tradition, made its own way. Subscribers to its publication included, among other eminent people, George Washington and General Humphreys."

Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, Canby, Ludwig
The Literary History of the United States
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 186-7

COMMENTARY

The Algerine Captive (1797)

"The hero, Updike Underhill, after an account of his youth and education in the backwoods of New England, and of his experiences as a schoolmaster there, goes on to Boston, begins the practice of medicine, proceeds to Philadelphia, where he meets Franklin, and to Virginia, where he is shocked at encountering a figure quite unknown to New England, a sporting parson; later he goes to sea, visits London, tells of Tom Paine, observes the horrors of a slave ship, and is captured by the Algerines, among whom he spends the six years recounted in the second volume. The value of the book lies largely in its report of facts, which it gives clearly and freshly. That Tyler thought of the traveler and the novelist as about equally his models appears from his preface."

Mark Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-1968) 9