Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*: The cultural foundations and the Contradictions of his Campaign for Freedom Explained

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Abstract:
This research seeks to explore in detail the cultural foundations and the contradictions in Royall Tyler’s campaign for freedom in *The contrast* (1787). More particularly, it puts emphasis on how Tyler wages his “culture war” and what measure of success he achieves in the highly divisive debate about cultural nationalism in the early American republic. To shed light on the issue of cultural independence, the play is placed within the context of the turbulent early years of the new nation, when each and every American across gender, ethnic, social class, faction or party lines challenged their fellow citizens to stay true to the revolutionary principles of democracy and freedom. It is argued that with *The contrast*, Tyler, irked by the cultural dependency of America under The Articles of Confederation, stepped into the public sphere in 1787, the year when the first draft of the Constitution was adopted, to make up a wake-up call for Americans still captured in the culturally corrosive cobweb of British texts and textiles. The socio-historical considerations brought to bear on the drama, together with the study of the text proper, have helped us to demonstrate that the play draws its inspiration from two major American cultural sources: the American culture of performance or culture of gentility and the American culture of folk humor or laughter. This research rounds off the argument about Tyler’s cultural nationalism with the highlighting of Tyler’s curtailment of the very freedom that he seeks to expand. The curtailment of freedom in *The contrast* is explained in terms of Tyler’s loyalty to a strand of republicanism based on class and gender hierarchies.

**Key words:** Class, culture, freedom, gender, nationalism, republicanism, Royall Tyler, *The contrast*

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Introduction:

“That’s the very fault, Mr. Jonathan. Besides, you absolutely misplace it. I was told by a friend of mine that you laughed outright at the play the other night, when you only ought to have tittered. (Tyler, 2020, p. 484)” These words about the rules of “laughter” addressed by a New York domestic servant (Jessamy) on hire to a foppish master (Mr. Billy Dimple) to a Yankee comic character (Jonathan), who hails from a little provincial town of Massachusetts, in service for Colonel Manly, a gentleman hero of the late revolutionary war, are at the origin of this research on the cultural foundations and contradictions of Tyler’s attempt to make his country break loose from the cultural influence of Britain. In the course of their exchange Jonathan, the small-n native, American comic type, laughs off Jessamy, his British-inspired, comedic counterpart, for his high pretension to provide him with lessons on humor. He outplays or outperforms him in the eyes of the American audience with an extravagance of laughter, derived from that homegrown form of American folk culture of humor, known as the Yankee Doodle. It is with this extravagance of American humor and the template of the culture of performance peculiar to his age that Tyler sets out in *The contrast* to lay his finger on the cultural shortcomings of the “Brave World,” or the “Land of the Free,” his fellow Americans have sworn by.

Tyler’s *The contrast* is consensually considered by critics as being the first American drama to be written and produced professionally in the new American Republic of Letters. Recognized by right as the first American dramatist, Tyler (1757-1826), who participated in the War of Independence and the suppression of the Shay Rebellion, and later made a name as judge, has been elevated by critics to the position of warrior for the literary and cultural independence of early America. To date, Tyler’s centrality in the canon of American literature has rested on his ability as a talented satirist. Scholars as various as Mar (2006), Richards (2008), Badwan, (2017) Mantelli (2019), and Roe (2020), to cite but a few, have underlined the satiric vein in which Tyler wrote *The contrast* in his bid to make his views known on a number of significant cultural and socio-political issues confronting the early American republic. Another predominant feature of the huge volume of critical literature thus far generated by *The contrast* is the illustration of the pervasive foreign influences exerted on its author. Writers such as Etheredge, O’Keeffe, Sheridan, Voltaire, and Etherege are put forth as typical cases of this influence, with little systematic scholarly attention accorded to the function of these influences or allusions in the context of the American culture of folk laughter and the American culture of performance sustaining the play at a much deeper level. In other words, Eurocentric readings or rather misreadings of Tyler’s play have disregarded the original manner with which Tyler deploys American folk humor as a ploy to play at hide and seek with the audience in taking the floor in the debate over highly controversial cultural issues as to the place of the arts in a virtuous republic. More significantly, they have failed to consider the impact of the author’s use of the culture of performance attached to an American culture of gentility on his conception and defense of cultural freedom.

So, this research purports to complete the already available scholarship on *The contrast* by investigating the cultural foundations and the crucial contradictions that its author has to face in his promotion of a cultural revolution that would immunize the early American republic against the danger of pollution by foreign cultural influences. As it unfolds its argumentation, it seeks to address the following questions: How and at what level does the culture of performance attached
to the American culture of gentility manifest itself in the play? Why does the author tap this native cultural vein in his fight for the extension of American freedom to the cultural field? How and why in parallel to the culture of performance does the author deploy the American culture of folk laughter? And finally how can we account for the contradictions in the effort of the playwright to make a stand for cultural nationalism through an art form itself considered a manifestation of the cultural vices that it seeks to expurgate? Is this not a concession to the camp of cultural liberalism and a rearguard reaction against the inevitable historical development of American culture? It would be of interest to answer all these questions which, more or less, are still posed to the American society today as it wages what in the parlance of Hunter (1991) are called the “culture wars.”

**The contrast and the American culture of performance:**

In his seminal book, *Revolutionary characters: What made the Founders different*, Wood (2006) has superbly demonstrated that the culture of performance in the early years of the republic was so persuasive on the American political elite that it could scarcely be determined. In this regard, he wrote the following insightful words about the Founding Fathers: “Preoccupied with their honor or their reputation, or, in other words, the way they were represented and viewed by others, these revolutionary leaders inevitably became characters, self-fashioned performers in the theater of life. (p. 23)” “Theirs,” Wood went on to observe, “was not character as we today are apt to understand it, as the inner personality that contains hidden contradictions and flaws. […] Instead their idea of character was the outer life, the public person trying to show the world that he was living up to the values and duties that the best of the culture imposed on him. (Ibid.)” The culture in question is called the culture of performance, and the values that are performed in the theater of life are the Enlightenment values and ideas – politeness, civility, sociability, learning, benevolence, benevolence, and truthfulness – looked at as inherent attributes of the ideal man of the times, that is to say the perfect gentleman. As a son of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution aspiring to the condition of gentleman author, he felt obliged to perform his character on the public stage. This is highly visible in the title page of his novel, *The Algerine captive* (2002), wherein Tyler deliberately omitted his name, and replaced the subheading of his book title (or the life and adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill) with an epigraph from Shakespeare’s *Othello*: “By your patience, / I will a round unvarnished tale deliver of my whole course. (Title page)” This editorial practice suggests how far Tyler complies with the culture of performance in viewing himself as a character on stage, that is to say a character, disinterestedly and integrally connected to society, and mindful of the values that he performs in front of the public.

It is in *The contrast* that Tyler provides the most revealing insight into the influence of the culture of performance on his imagination as a playwright. The characterization of Colonel Manly gives an illustrative example of this influence. The culture of performance accounts for what, at first sight, looks like an exaggerated civic-mindedness on the part of the demobilized Colonel Manly (Manly henceforward) on a mission to New York to plead the cause of the veterans of the American Revolution. Similar, what on the face of it looks like a self-consciously arrogant, classic pose of heroic and noble preeminence on the part of Manly can find an explanation in the American culture of performance. We would contend that that Manly is true to life in playing the part of a typical gentleman character that has naturally stepped out of the theatre of life into a professionally
staged play or drama. Indeed, unless Manly’s identity performance is looked at from the perspective of the American culture of gentility, we would be easily misguided in our judgment of Manly, who falls victim to character assassination by his sister, Charlotte, even before he appears physically on stage. Anticipating the shame that her provincial visiting brother would bring shame on her and her family, Charlotte cools down Laetitia, her uncle’s ward, excited at the thought of meeting a sociable man of mode, that she imagines to be made of the same fabric as his sister: “His [Manly’s] conversation made me melancholy as if I had been to church; and heaven knows, though I never prayed to go there but on one occasion, yet I would have exchanged his conversation for a psalm and a sermon. (p.452)”

In compliance with this culture, Manly, Tyler’s alter ego, aspires to belong to the emerging American gentlemanly class or gentry. To use Wood’s words, both playwright and central character urgently seek to cut a high figure “not as individualists, but as a men worried about their social identities. (2006: 23)” And just in the same way as the American gentry of their time, “they are enmeshed in the society and civic-minded by necessity; thus they hide their personal feelings for the sake of civility and sociability and their public personas. (Ibid.)” Curiously enough, the symbolic dimension of the high-ranking military title that Tyler bestows on his central character is not accorded all the attention it deserves in the critical literature, which the discussion of The contrast has so far, generated. Admittedly, Arab (1996) is the one critic who has touched upon on few aspects of this key issue when he declared that “the context of a text begins by he who wrote it (p.44),” referring to Tyler’s vocation as judge, his participation alongside George Washington in the American Revolution, and his “engagement to [Abigail Adams] the daughter of the future President of the United States [John Adams, which] ended in shambles. (Ibid.)” However, Arab, just like other fellow critics, has not drawn the symbolic implication of Tyler’s uncanny family resemblance with his central characters, and the mantle of “culture warrior (Roe, 2020, p. 1)” that they are made to take. We would sustain that the title of a demobilized Colonel of the Continental army which Manly bears in The contrast signals, above all, Tyler’s and his character’s aspiration to earn a place among the ruling gentry of his time. Wood (2006) provides a useful insight in regard with this symbolic dimension of characterization in Tyler’s play when he has made the following remark: “Not having enough gentlemen to staff the officer corps became a continuing problem for Washington and the Continental army. Instead of the status of gentlemen entitling a man to be an officer, too many ordinary men tried to use their military rank to prove that they were in fact gentlemen. (p. 19)” This statement is applicable in the case of Manly as culture warrior in the Tyler’s play.

However, the culture of performance is not solely a matter of manners and social conduct, as it might have been suggested above. It is also a question of revolution in the art of rhetoric as Fliegelman (1996) hammered it, in his seminal book, Declaring Independence: Jefferson, natural language, and the culture of performance. A typical example of this rhetoric is provided in the prologue to The contrast. Just as in the title page of The Algerine captive, our aspiring dramatist holds back his name from the audience in a characteristic gesture of gentlemanly disinterestedness in his pretension to authorship. He contents himself with this self-effacing statement: “Prologue written by a young gentleman of New York, and spoken by Mr. Wignell. (p. 438)” It might be argued that the emphasis put on the gentility of the author is the one cause that has dissuaded Tyler
to stay backstage and to have his prologue spoken instead in order not to expose himself to ridicule in case of the failure of the play at a premiere that he regards as a festive moment celebrating the birth of American drama. Indeed, as put forward earlier in this research, in the culture of performance that permeates the play, and most particularly in its prologue, life is first and foremost, a theatre, and that in this theatre of life, impressions made on spectators is what counts most for a gentleman. Hence, the question that comes to mind here: Can we take Tyler’s preservation of his anonymity as an expression of a gentleman’s apprehension that he could lose face in front of an audience not yet weaned off British drama? The answer is absolutely yes. And yet, we would also sustain that Tyler’s reticence to announce his name loud and clear speaks of his anxiety to play by the rules of the culture of performance. Indeed, it would not be becoming for such gentlemen turned authors as Tyler to lose rhetorical self-control in a festive celebration of cultural independence, and worse to appear self-congratulatory about his authorship on the premiere of a play, whose rate of success is not yet certain.

On another plane, Tyler’s prologue as well as his play were written and performed with the spirit of the revolutionary rhetoric of the culture of performance in mind. “Exult, each patriot heart!” Tyler’s stand-in, Mr. Wignell, starts to recite the prologue in a declamatory tone. “This night is shewn/ A piece, which we may fairly call our own;/ Where the proud titles of ‘My Lord! Your Grace!/ To humble Mr. and Sr. give place. (p.438)” This announcement of the birth of American drama reads as a rhetorical uncrowning of its aristocratic-oriented British comedic counterparts in its degradation of the aristocratic rules of address and the democratization of the Americans as equal citizens. This momentous artistic event is conceived as a carnivalesque moment of social leveling with an exaltation of feeling or passion of literary patriotism. The uncrowning of British culture, a process pertaining to what Bakhtin calls the culture of folk humor, recalls a similar uncrowning of George III in the Declaration of Independence. Mr. Wignell’s rhetorical celebration of the birth of American drama goes on to celebrate the birth of “Our author [who] pictures not from foreign climes/ The fashions or the follies of the times;/ But has confin’d the subject of his work/ To the gay scenes – the circles of New York. (p. 438)” Assuming the role of a Columbian orator, the playwright announces the displacement and replacement of an imported culture of entertainment by an American folk culture of laughter. Giving up the sword that he had wielded against the insurgents in the Shays’ Rebellion, Mr. Wignell-Tyler takes up the barrel of the pen as a culture warrior to enable America to break loose from the cultural grip that Britain had on post-colonial America.

The above-quoted verses of the prologue that Tyler prefigures the festive perception of a new born world in a celebratory comedy, written and performed, as it is loudly proclaimed, from an indigenous perspective, and with a focus on the “gay scenes” of New York or “native themes.” The prologue seems to be marked by awareness that the sentimental, patriotic audience attending the play is mature enough to make its own both the portrayal of “faults” and “virtues”. The focus on faults and virtues sets the comedy within the framework of Menippea or satire. As for the playwright, he clearly wears the costume or mask of an ideologue, a hero-playwright involved in a baptismal service for the birth of American comedy. The body politic of America is thus envisioned not as a perfect political body but as that “unfinished or incomplete body” that Bakhtin (1984) has described as a hallmark of the folk culture of laughter and its reduced forms in artistic
manifestations. As a publicity and celebration of the birth of American drama, the prologue also urges the “patriot heart” of the American consumer of artistic product to entertain and educate themselves through American artistic production now that they are made available in the American culture market. “Why should our thoughts to distant countries roam./ When each refinement may be found at home? (p.438),” Mr. Wignell-Tyler exhorts his countrymen and American theatre goers.

This expostulation is followed up by the uncrowning of the imitative attitude of the “unpatriotic American consumer’ by contrasting the solidity, substantiality, sincerity, and democratic spirit of American republican art forms with the artificiality, aristocratic sophistication, and the ornamental nature of the imported cultural productions. It is in this revolutionary rhetoric pertaining to the culture of performance that the reader can feel the playwright’s continuing adoption of the elocutionary revolution that constituted one of the grounds on which the British presence in America is contested in the Declaration of Independence: “Who travels now to ape the rich or great./ To deck an equipage and roll in state;/ To court the graces, or to dance with ease,/ Or by hypocrisy to strive to please?” Mr. Wignell-Tyler exclaims in rejection of the outmoded, artificial behavior of American imitators of British aristocracy in the “Land of the Free,” presumably divorced from Britain. The slavish cultural imitation of the British aristocratic culture is declared to be contrary to the American republican character and ethos, for “Our free-born ancestors such arts despis’d;/ Genuine sincerity alone they priz’d; /Their minds with honest emulation fir’d;/ To solid good – not ornament – aspir’d;/ Or, if ambition rous’d a bolder flame,/

Stern virtue throve, where indolence was shame. (p.438)” In these verses, the castigation of imitation, that is to say aping as a form of cultural servility, is contrasted to the celebration of emulation as a time-honored principle of the American culture of performance.

Three major concepts in the play’s prologue deserve special attention: authorship, imitation, and emulation. According to Fliegelman, these notions played a significant role in the American cultural debate about the arts, language, and rhetoric in the last decades of the eighteenth century. They emerged as part and parcel of a rhetorical revolution that sustained the American War of Independence, and stimulated what Fliegelman called the “culture of performance,” peculiar to the American gentry or the educated, political elite. In this culture of performance, what counts most is not solely the syllogistic and ornamental model of Aristotelian or Ciceronian argumentation, but also the oratorical process of delivery of feelings or sentiments through a natural language as well as natural theatricality associated with appropriate body language. In this regard, Fliegelman sustained that communication in this culture of performance is not centered on the communication of messages but on the expression of feeling as well. One of the social or sociological outcomes of the revolutionary rhetoric is the birth of what Fliegelman named “the society of feeling” in replacement of the contractual type of society analyzed by such scholars as Locke and Rousseau. It is in the name of natural feeling as a mark of gentlemanly self-control, freedom, and national identity that the Thirteen Colonies declared their independence to the unfeeling British brethren and King George III, whose support for unjust laws disqualified him to the pretension of the title of “father” that he abusively accorded himself.

In this feeling society, the premium in cultural matters, as it transpires in the rhetoric of the culture of performance, was put neither on rash innovation nor on servile imitation but on
emulation. To account for this cultural concept, Fliegelman quoted John Adams who defined it “as an imitation and something more, a desire not only to equal or resemble but to excel. Emulation next to self-preservation will forever be the great spring of human action. (as cited in Fliegelman, 1993, p.180)” At work in this definition is a developmental theory of history that Adams deployed to announce the end of one cycle of cultural and political history, that of apprenticeship, and the dialectical move to a new cultural cycle wherein the apprentice announces that s/he is no longer an apprentice but a master in his own right and a better one at that. This proto-Hegelian dialectic of master-apprentice, in which the dynamics of American identity and freedom is formulated, is carnivalized by Tyler in his pretention to have produced a comic “piece” that excels Sheridan’s comedy The school of scandal that he had the opportunity to attend in New York City just a few weeks earlier. This downgrading of British models or comic templates is performed inside the play through the mouth of Jonathan, a New England Yankee yokel. With an irony that cuts deep, the playwright makes his character call Sheridan’s drama a “school for scandalization.”

The prologue to Tyler’s play is as much concerned with the blind imitation of British text models and as with imported, fashionable clothing or textiles. If the first stanza has placed emphasis on literary identity or literary nationalism, the second stanza puts stress on sartorial identity, on clothes as a marker of national identity, which in Tyler’s/Mr.Wignell’s eyes, is closely linked to freedom. The American is presumably always and everywhere a free citizen. In this respect, the “modern youths” are blamed for their “imitative sense,” and their shameful disregard for the plain style of “homespun habits,” and their preference of imported textiles vainly “aiming at splendor and parade. (p.438)” Hence, for Tyler the identity of what Crevecoeur calls the “New Man” in America largely depends on what he wears, reads, or sees on the theatrical stage. This dynamic of identity divested of what Paine describes as “royal plumage” is what makes the play a folkloric celebration of the naissance of a “Brave New World,” wherein the artificial, aristocratic ways of life are banned and demoted in favor of a homegrown habitus. The word is Bourdieu’s (2013).

Some critics have dismissed Tyler’s play as full of “talk” but with no plot, in complete disregard of the “culture of performance” with whose spirit the play was written and staged. Indeed, the characters talk a lot, but in so doing each and every one of them performs their identities on the stage, conceived as a theater of life. Jonathan’s mistaking of the stage for real life in the play is quite significant in this regard. So, if this character’s hint is not taken seriously, the impact of the American culture on the play’s plot and characterization can be easily lost on the reader and lead her/her to misjudgment about the perfections and flaws of the play. On the whole, two types of characters can be distinguished in the play in accordance to the principles of the American culture of performance. The sentimental or feeling characters and the non-sentimental or unfeeling ones conceived as foils to the former. As already stated above, the identity marker of the American society in the culture of performance is fellow feeling or fellowship. This national trait morally sets it apart from European societies.

The play starts with two female characters, Charlotte and Letitia, who with their ill-advised cultural liberalism threaten the very fabric of the American society as an imagined community of feeling. These two characters are engaged in a heated discussion about fashion. In an echo to the
prologue, Charlotte dismisses the pocket-hoop as unfashionable. In her first address to Letitia, Charlotte shows up as a victim of fashion:

It may be very becoming to saunter round the house of a rainy day; to visit my grand-mamma, or to go to the Quakers’ meeting: but to swim in a minuet, with the eyes of fifty well-dressed beaux upon me, trip it in the Mall, or walk on the Battery give me the luxurious jaunty flowing bell-hoop. (p.439)

These first words make it clear that Charlotte is cast in the role of coquette, so enticed with what comes from abroad that she discards the national habit. The irony is that what she praises as fashion was already outdated in Britain where it was worn only in corrupt court circles. It is worth noting that the imitative way of dressing herself is as offensive and extravagant as the manner she dresses her thoughts and feelings about fashion as well as about her fellow countrymen and countrywomen. It is not difficult to guess that Charlotte’s identity performance is intended as an exposure to public scrutiny of the foibles of a derivative British coquette captured by Chesterfieldian texts and British fashionable textiles. As the proverb goes “Birds of a feather flock together,” so it is not surprising that the coquettes seek the company of Anglophile foppish beaux, best represented in the play by the villain, Mr. Dimple. The latter offers a dismal spectacle of alienation from genuine “American character,” in view of the dissipation of his father’s legacy during his sojourn in England, his adoption of Chesterfielded as a mentor, and his glaring dishonesty as a playboy. “The genius of the Euro-American in the Anglo-American eye,” Richards (2008) wrote, is the ability to transform to non-European, or really non-English types. (p. 28).” Obviously, these strangely un-American birds of a feather, which seem to have flocked to New York City from foreign climes, have not completely succeeded to turn into genuinely free small-n American natives.

As comically, morally detestable, and scornful characters, which never lose an opportunity to laugh at those who display real American character traits, they are given all the time to incriminate themselves through their own mouths, and thus lose their credentials for American citizenship/freedom. Uncrowned Mr. Billy Dimple, Charlotte and Letitia are practically dismissed out of the stage to give place to the crowning of Manly and Maria, offered to the audience as the true national types, that is to say as figures who have stayed true to the American culture of performance in their display of what is regarded as virtuous manhood and womanhood. In reversing the authority of the estranged characters thwarting the transformation of early America into a community of feeling and fellowship, Tyler is true to the hopeful spirit of carnival. The fear that the infant republic would remain in classic imperial relationship with Britain in matters of culture and material production and consumption is dispelled. Aesthetically, the play itself uncrowns British models like Sheridan’s The school of scandals (1777) and Etherege’s The man of mode (1676), to become a symbol for the rare breed of American drama to come out of selected Yankee stock. In the end, Tyler as a cultural nationalist does not seek to imitate his British precursors, but rather to emulate and surpass them in terms of excellence. Thus, Tyler’s dramatic authorship relies on the rhetoric of freedom articulated around emulation, which in the words of Adams already quoted consists of “a desire not only to equal or resemble but to excel” in an attempt to consolidate “manly virtue” in the new republic.
Tyler’s reactivation of the rhetoric of the champions of freedom in the context of dramatic authorship is not free of contradictions. Williams (2008) did not hit the mark when he dismissed the originality of the characterization of Jonathan and Manly, considering the former as an “absurdist” figure, and the latter as a “well-known British comedic hero type-some combination of, say, Charles Dudley in Richard Cumberland’s The West Indian (1771) and Mr. Belville in Frances Brooke’s Rosina (1782). (p.28)” As claimed above, the characterization of Manly is in line with the American culture of gentility attached to culture of performance. Contrary to Mr. Dimple’s borrowed and decadent gentility, Manly’s homegrown ideal of gentility is, to use Wood’s words (2006) in another context, strikingly marked by “grace without foppishness, refinement without ostentation, virtue without affectation, and independence without arrogance. (p.22)” We could sustain that if Williams, for instance, has lumped Mr. Dimple in together with Colonel Manly, it is because he has underestimated the historical and socio-cultural conditions that enabled the rise and growth of the culture of gentility in the United States of America in the course of the eighteenth-century. In this regard, Wood made the following apt observation: “Because America, as the future governor of New Jersey William Livingston was ‘just emerging from the rude unpolished Condition of an Infant Country,’ it was especially eager to move along the spectrum of social development toward greater refinement and civilization, more so perhaps than itself.(p.20).

In developing further the above point, Wood sustained that the Enlightenment ideal of gentility was born and maintained in its purer form not in the centers of European culture, but paradoxically on its peripheries. “Both Scots and the North Americans […],” he maintained, “knew that they lived in cruder and more simple societies than the English and that England was well along in the course stage of development – commercial society – and had much to offer them in the ways of politeness and refinement. (pp. 20-21)” The four stages of the evolution of culture and civilization to which Wood refers in the citation are amply detailed by Adam Smith in The wealth of nations (1776). Smith was to the eighteenth-century thinkers what Darwin would become to their counterparts in the second half of the nineteenth century. Writing from the Scottish periphery of the British Empire Smith, who was one of the foremost Enlightenment pioneers in political economy, saw the evolution toward commercial society as inevitable. At the same time, he underlined the inevitability in the growth of opportunities and scope of corruption as an upshot of the expansion of commercialism. Smith’s warning against the necessary evil of corruption in the commercial society finds an echo in Jefferson’s writings about the potential dangers of commercialism for democracy and freedom in the early American republic. These theories of social and economic development in the air at the time Tyler wrote his drama largely explains the contrast between the imitative and corrupt gentility of Mr. Dimple, who has sojourned in the commercial center of Empire, and Manly’s homegrown or homespun gentility. Instead of imitation of foreign models of gentility, Tyler’s drama promotes emulation and the excellence over these same models.

The sharp contrast between the central male characters, Manly and Mr. Dimple, is strikingly similar to the contrast established between the heroines, Charlotte (Manly’s sister who significantly is brought up in New York City) and Letitia (a ward of Charlotte’s uncle) on the one hand, and Maria (Mr. Dimple’s fiancée). The latter is pictured as an American gentlewoman, or
lady, in other words as the true daughter of the American Enlightenment and the American Revolution. When she first appears in the second act, she is shown “sitting disconsolate at a table, with books (p.445), singing an Indian song, “Alnomook, or the death of the Cherokee Indian,” in a stoic lament over her unfortunate betrothal and forthcoming wedding with Mr. Dimple. Her change of heart toward her fiancée is explained by Mr. Dimple’s corrupt change of character during his stay in England. The latter has come back home to America as a brainwashed, depraved gentleman, who has gambled away his deceased father’s inheritance. On the contrary, Maria takes the opportunity of her stay at home in America to cultivate her mind with the best literature that her age can offer, and thus grows into a self-educated gentlewoman. Her recitation of the Indian song signals that her gentility has a stoic, native strain to it. Obviously, for Tyler, the soldier turned scholar and playwright, education and the scene of instruction are of vital importance for the emergence of an American gentry and the creation of a virtuous republic over which they would rule by moral right.

The development of the engaged characters, Maria and Mr. Dimple in strikingly different cultural environments creates a mutual incompatibility in social temperament and proclivity. The conflict resides in the fact that they are not a perfect match for each other because of the moral differences in the education they have received. With his corrupt mindset, Mr. Dimple keeps scheming to get married to a woman of fortune (Letitia) with the morally reprehensible calculation of making up for his monetary loss. He is persistently and deliberately insulting to his fiancée, because he wants to make her break off their engagement, put her at fault, and be free to get married to Letitia. Raised in England, which is culturally well along the fourth and final stage of economic and socio-cultural development, that is to say in a commercial society deeply steeped in luxury and corruption, Mr. Dimple views holy matrimony in terms of commerce rather than companionship and true love. In marked contrast, Maria is true to the American culture of gentility to which she has meritoriously acceded by her own efforts, and in a household ruled by a boorish father, significantly called Van Rough. Abiding by the rules of the culture of performance, she makes it her duty not to act out of character as a self-educated, gentlewoman that would put her reputation and that of her father to shatters.

Maria’s self-performed character as a self-educated gentlewoman or lady also sets her sharply apart from the two scheming coquettes, Charlotte and Letitia. As said previously, these two female characters are portrayed as frivolous, gossipy, backbiting, and fetishistic about “Things English,” including Mr. Dimple, who is fashioned by corrupt British culture during his stay in England. To say it in another way, until toward the end of the play where their illusions are suddenly dispelled by the revelation of the falsehoods of their fetish gentleman (Mr. Dimple), Charlotte and Letitia show no mark of American gentility whatever in their liberal tastes and entertainments. Unlike Maria, who has thought freshly about the meaning of being civilized and civil in the new American republic, Charlotte and Letitia have not made the necessary effort to acquire an education that would elevate them in terms of that virtue, which presumably distinguished America from the former mother country. Their profligacy expresses Tyler’s deep concern for the future of the Infant republic, which seems not to have focused attention on giving the right moral education to its children, sons and daughters, who constitute the “rising generation.”
Speaking about the “intergeneration” contrast, the contrast between Maria and her father, Van Rough, provides a typical example. Even in this case, the contrast is rendered in terms of gentility. Van Rough is true to his name, for he is decried as a boorish character, for whom only estates and money count in matters of matrimony. He tosses away Maria’s books and journals, thinking that they are responsible for her reluctance to honor the marital contract that he passed with his deceased friend and business partner Van Dumpling. He silences Maria’s rebellious heart with the severe reprimand: “I’d have you know Mary, if you won’t make young Van Dumpling the man of your choice, you shall make him as the man of my choice. (p.448)” Throughout the play, Van Rough plays the part of a stock character, for whom Maria, his own blood and flesh, is a commodity, a mere chattel, to be sold to the highest bidder in the marriage market. “No, no, no! It is money makes the mare go; keep your eye upon the main chance, Mary (p.448),” is the sole piece of advice that this business-minded father, behaving in every way like a brute horse dealer, is capable of giving to his daughter.

To sum up, a huge number of scholars have tried to uncover all the possible contrasts on which conflict prospers in Tyler’s drama. Roe (2020), for instance, has tried to provide an exhaustive list of cases in the following citation:

The original situation comedy [The contrast], its action is in its contrasts, and each playful comparison brings to life a spirited conflict: Old/Young, Integrity/Pretence, Merchant/Inheritor, Soldier/Socialite, Europe/America; Parent/Child; New York/Boston, Duty/Desire; City/Country, Tradition/Innovation; Man/Woman. Each character’s story illustrates something of an American legacy. (p.1)

Other critics have excavated no less interesting contrasts than those enumerated by Roe in the citation above. However, none of these contrasts is properly accounted in terms of the cultural matrix from which all the contrasts in Tyler’s play sprout. We have already suggested above that this cultural matrix consists of the American culture of gentility and the American culture of performance in which it finds expression. As a gentleman turned dramatist, Tyler holds these two cultures as a yardstick by which the worthiness of character in the theater of life is to be measured. We agree with Roe in pointing out, that the contrasts in the play have their source in a permeating sense of crisis, but his conclusion is incomplete, and therefore, unsatisfactory. We would complete here by arguing that for Tyler the crisis resides primarily in the threat to the homespun culture of gentility and the culture performance of which constitute the very fabric of the American society. Norton, Katzman, Escott, et al. (1991) have hinted at this cultural crisis in writing what follows: “Despite the artists’ efforts, or perhaps because of them some would have said, some Americans were beginning to detect signs of luxury and corruption by the mid-1780s. (p.107)”

What Norton et al. (1991) went on to underlie is even more closely related to the major theme of Tyler’s play: “The end of the war and resumption of European trade brought a return to fashionable clothing styles and the abandonment of homespun garments patriots had once worn with pride. (p.107)” We would contend that unless this socio-cultural context is properly considered, Charlotte’s insistence that her brother give up his old military uniform and wear
fashionable, imported clothes, so that he can enjoy New York social life will not be fully understood: “Well, but brother, positively I can’t introduce you in these clothes; why your coat looks as if it were calculated for the vulgar purpose of keeping yourself comfortable. (p.455)” Sartorial expression turns into a source of disagreement between sister and brother, reflecting the historical evolution of postcolonial American socio-cultural life. For Charlotte, the wearing of an old military coat is totally disgraceful since a new page in American history is being turned, while for Manly that same coat is a source of pride in the military service that he has generously provided to his country during the “late war […] and the public tumults of our state [Shays’ Rebellion in Massachusetts]. (p.456)”

On the face of it, the argument that Charlotte and Manly have engaged is a simple family disagreement. And yet, looked at very closely, it has an unsuspected political dimension that speaks of deep-seated divisions in early America between the cultural nationalists and cultural liberals. As representative figures of the big American family, Charlotte and Manly show to what extent the nation is culturally fractured. The sister stands for those “Well-dressed elite families,” which in the words of Norton et al. (1991), “attended balls and concerts. [For them] parties no longer seemed complete without gambling and card playing. (p.107)” It is significant in this regard that Charlotte and Letitia keep speaking about balls and that Mr. Dimple has gamble away his deceased father’s wealth. The American elite families to which Norton et al. refer in the citation found a political expression in the establishment of the Society of Cincinnati, a hereditary organization of the Continental Army officers and their descendants, which elected George Washington as president. In the eyes of the Society of Cincinnati, the latter took after the Roman republican hero, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, famously remembered for having retreated to his farm as soon as he led the Roman army to victory. As Norton et.al. went on to note, “Many feared that the group [the Society of Cincinnati ] would become the nucleus of a native-born aristocracy. [Ibid.]” Under the light of what is said above, we would safely argue that Manly belongs to that category of American political elite, who were much concerned with the transformation of America into a hereditary monarchy. For him and the natural aristocracy that he also stands for, the cultural and political trend toward the constitution of a hereditary aristocracy and a monarchical system directly challenge the revolutionary image of America as a virtuous republic. Simply said, this trend awakened the apprehension that America would be transformed into a mirror image of British monarchy.

Unlike his sister, Many shuns the fashionable New York circles and betrays in his conversation an anxiety to have his status and social rank determined not by his ancestry, or the size of his estates, but by his behavior and learning as a gentleman belonging by right to the American natural aristocracy. Throughout the play, he stays true to the culture of performance that this natural aristocracy has adopted as a way of life. Tyler’s anxious wake-up call for the Americans trapped in imported ways of life ends with the hopeful resolution of the various family conflicts. Victory is scored over both Billy Dimple, the reprehensible Anglophile aristocrat, and Van Rough, Maria’s boorish father. The latter agrees to Manly’s marriage proposal, and the chastened coquette, Charlotte, is emotionally reconciled  or reconnected with her virtuous brother. Thus, Tyler’s deep-seated concern for the future of the infant republic is diffused in the romantic
happy ending of a comedy, the plots and the characters of which are inspired by the American culture of performance.

American folk Laughter and paradox in *The contrast*

The other source of inspiration of *The Contrast*, as the introduction of this research has already indicated, is the American folk culture of laughter or humor. This culture, best represented by the Yankee Doodle, is at the basis of the double plotting of Tyler’s play. The characters involved in the double plot are Manly’s servant Jonathan and Billy Temple’s domestic servants, Jessamy and Jenny. These servants resemble their respective masters though they play at a lower social level of Tyler’s comedy of manners. While Jessamy and Jenny reflect Mr. Dimple’s social and moral manners in their snobbishness and scheming, Jonathan plays the role of country cousin from New England in as simple and natural a manner as his master. Significantly, Jonathan, who has never been to such a big city as New York, turns out to be ahead of the game in making the audience laugh naturally, and we would say in complicit with this same audience, in his breaching the rules of high society’s laughter dictated to him by the pretentious dramatist-character and city slicker, Jessamy. Through the extravagance of laughter that he triggers off, Jonathan uncrowns Jessamy’s self-assumed authority as a master in the art of comedy. He turns out to be as good in the American culture of laughter as his master in the performance of the American culture of gentility. We would further sustain that if the contemporary American audience and readers were reportedly in tune with Jonathan, it is because they have arguably recognized in him a tie of kinship. This kinship can be called Yankee-ness, marked, among other things, by that deeply ingrained capacity of the Yankees to engage in self-derision even when they are deadly serious. Self-derision is what the American audience and readers seem to have appreciated in Jonathan who sets the tone for it in performing a Yankee Doodle song on the stage.

Jonathan is a naïve country bumpkin, but he is far from showing the “absurdist naivety,” which to quote Richards (2008), “shifts the burden of identity to Manly. (p.28)” Admittedly, he displays innocence in taking one of the red zones of New York, euphemistically called Holy Ground, for a consecrated place of worship. He is surprised and shocked to learn from Jessamy that he has been to such a sinful place, and that he “had a month’s mind to buss” a soliciting harlot whom he has wrongly thought to be the “deacon’s daughter. (p.460)” Similarly, Jonathan is surprised and shocked to learn that he has been to the theater, “the devil’s room,” he calls it, where he has enjoyed his time mistaking it for “the place where they played hocus-pocus. (p.46)” However, though all these misadventures speak of the naivety of Jonathan, we would still contend, that they are not out of character with the Yankee yokel that he represents. At work in his characterization is what Bakhtin calls carnivalization, a creative literary process involving, among other aspects of carnival, the emphasis on the body processes, the use of the language of the market place, the questioning of authority, status reversal, and so on.

So, in line with Bakhtin’s thought about popular laughter, we would claim that it is in character with the Yankee carnival type such as Jonathan to have ill feelings when Jessamy has called him a “servant.” As a carnivalistic figure not in line of duty, he does not recognize the authority of his master, and that of the high society of the audience to which he plays a comic role on the stage. As for Jessamy’s mannered language, it is dismissed as an “outlandish lango (p.458),”
which speaks non-sense in comparison with the natural language of the folks back home. We would also that it is not out of character for Jonathan to pun on Jessamy’s learned words, e.g., “sturgeons” for “insurgents of [the Shays’ Rebellion]” in the sentence “I vow I think the sturgeons were right (Ibid.),” or “Girl Huntry” for “gallantry” in the sentences: “Girl Huntry! I don’t altogether understand. I never played at that game. I know how to play hunt the squirrel, but I can’t play anything with the girls; I am as good as married. (p.460)” When he finally decides to play what he calls “that game,” he does not receive a medal of gallantry that he naively expects, but a slap on the face from Jenny for the awkwardness of his courtship. His coarse courtship savors of slapstick comedy inspired by the New England ritual of courtship, known as bundling. Thus, in steeping his drama in the American folk culture of humor, Tyler a carnivalistic Yankee hero, who seems to take pleasure in subverting the authority of Jessamy the Anglophile comic enemy turned dramatist in Tyler’s comedy of manners. Laughter or satirical humor turns into stylization and parody of the British comedies alludes to in his exchange with Jessamy and Jessy.

The upshot of Tyler’s simultaneous deployment of the American culture of performance and American culture of laughter in double plots in *The contrast* is the exaltation of cultural Yankee-ness in the full sense of the word, that is to say the celebration of the Yankee type as both a dead serious person as well as a likable person capable of self-derision. This being said, Tyler’s dramatic tour de force is not devoid of paradoxes. In the first place, in “writing back to the empire (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002),” in order to abrogate American cultural dependency on Britain, and thus preserve and extend American freedom, Tyler feels somewhat constrained or forced to wrap up his gift/artistic commodity in a fashionable British package so as to make sure that his contemporaries would reciprocate to it. The package in question here consists of the huge number of allusions to British literary models, such as Sheridan’s comedy *The school of scandals*, to O’Keeffe’s operetta, *The poor soldier*, to mention but two titles of works that the unlettered Jonathan refers to in the play. These allusions evidence the extent of the cultural influence that Britain still exerted on American theater-goers in the early American republic. Instead of taking these allusions as a ploy employed by Tyler to circulate his play to an audience not yet familiar with homegrown or homespun artistic products, a huge number of present-day academics have seen in them a sign of the derivative nature of the work. To say it in other terms, they have mistaken the allusive packaging for the engraved American label on the gift/drama inside that package.

The second paradox of the play is the curtailment of the very freedom that Tyler wishes to expand in through reconciled “imagined community” of feeling that he projects at the end of the play. This curtailment of freedom shows in the masculine, patriarchal, and class domination to which Maria and Jonathan all too willingly give their consent. As products of their social and economic circumstances, as well as creatures of the playwright’s ideology, Maria and Jonathan are displayed as unconditional admirers of the gentleman master, Manly, placed at the top of the social hierarchy. Maria falls in love at first sight with Manly when he has inadvertently stumbled into her lodgings proudly dressed in his old military coat, his badge of courage and patriotism. When these two characters are brought together in other scenes, their conversation as worthy children of the American Revolution and the American Enlightenment shows their total subscription to the law of the father. No parricide, political or otherwise, is committed in *The contrast*. Our hero and heroine discover themselves as soul mates in the course of their gallant exchanges, but they content
themselves with tugging at each other’s heart strings over an impossible love. Maria makes the wrong guess that Manly is already in wedlock while Manly on his part disappointedly finds out that Maria is engaged to Mr. Dimple.

The reader attends a fairly tale moment when Manly avows his love to Maria. “The moment I entered your room,” Manly tells Maria, “you struck me as the lady whom I had long loved in imagination and never hoped to see. (p.483)” However, when he learns that his “Sleeping Beauty” is on the point of entering an arranged marriage, in reluctant compliance with her father’s wishes, Manly is terrified out of his wits for having inadvertently trespassed on, what for an honorable male like him, is another man’s private property. “Engaged to be married!” he exclaims in dismay and horror, “And have I been basely invading the rights of another. (p.483). Without further thought, our hero recoils from the idea of betraying another male, making a strong confirmation of patriarchal law and man’s private rights over women: “We are both unhappy; but it is our duty to obey your parent – mine to obey my honor. Let us, therefore, both follow the path of rectitude. (p.483)” This declared loyalty to the patriarchal system is followed by a taboo reaction: “Adieu! I dare not trust myself longer with you, (Ibid.)” he said in parting company from the love-stricken Maria. Obviously, the manly virtue of the American natural aristocracy that Tyler’s hero displays in playing out his character as an honorable gentleman in the theater of life is not a mere abstraction, but a marker of virility and curtailment of women’s freedom to have their own say as what to do with their private lives.

*The contrast* was written and professionally in 1787 in New York City, then just as now the most cosmopolitan city of the early American republic. The year 1787 is a highly significant year in American history because it saw the drafting of the Constitution, through which Americans hoped to put an end to the trials of the Confederation both at home and abroad. The Constitution affirms in strong terms the democratic principles and popular sovereignty, but as Norton et al., (1991), observed, “Some historians have argued that the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution reflected opposing political philosophies, the Constitution representing an ‘aristocratic’ counterrevolution against the ‘democratic’ Articles. (p. 105)” Manly’s martial air conveys something of the flavor of this ‘aristocratic counterrevolution’ in his expression of his patriotism, and his pride in being the spiritual son of the American Revolution and the Founding Father of the American Republic, George Washington. “I have humbly imitated our illustrious Washington,” Manly tells his sister, “in having exposed my wealth and life in the service of my country, without reaping any other reward than the glory of conquering in so arduous a contest. (p. 454)” Such disinterestedness or sacrifice of private material interests for the country sets him apart, at least in his eyes and those of the dramatist, as a typical American gentleman deserving a place among the natural aristocracy. This natural aristocracy, it is implied by the play, has by merit rather than inherited wealth or status established the political right to manage the affairs of the new republic.

Hence, paradoxically, the brand of republicanism promoted through his principal character as a representative figure of the educated American ruling elite or gentry curtails the freedom not only of women but also of the ordinary male citizenry. The latter are also required to sacrifice their political rights in return for the ruling elite’s material disinterestedness in order to achieve a
workable, virtuous republic, wherein every citizen, male and female, knows her/his place. Clearly, the relation of willing subordination that Jonathan and Maria show toward our soldier and gentleman scholar turned advocate of cultural nationalism and patriotism speaks of the social and political stratification of Tyler’s strand of republicanism. In view of the above social and political hierarchies, we would say with The contrast Tyler takes us all the way back to the conception of the household in Aristotle’s Politics, and Plato’s The Republic. According to Norton et al., (1996) the “ancient and political theory” propounded by Greek authors like Aristotle and Plato served the American educated elite to imagine the early American republic. (p.106)

Conclusion:

Since Tyler plays at hide-and-seek with us in setting the notoriously difficult task of digging out all the contrasts and contradictions that his drama contains, we shall round off this research with a very brief comparison of Tyler’s The contrast with his contemporary Brackenridge’s novel, Modern chivalry: containing the adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague O’Regan, his servant (1792). Obviously, as the title of this novel shows, Brackenridge has taken his cue from Tyler’s play. However, these two works are strikingly different in their treatment of social class, though equally inspired by the American culture of gentility (culture of performance) and American culture of laughter. Brackenridge patterns his characterization and plot on Tyler’s, but instead of staging his characters in double plots, he involves them in heated discussion about the contradictory plans that they have hatched up for the new nations as they stroll the streets of Philadelphia and the remote reaches of the Western Frontier. So, whereas Tyler sweeps against the tide of cultural and sociopolitical evolution in his pious wish for the triumph of the American gentry, Brackenridge puts stress on social and political contention, on how to make the social reality of early America square with the rhetoric of equality and freedom championed by the Founding Fathers in the Constitution. The revolutionary rhetoric of emulation peculiar to the American culture of performance and culture of gentility which underpin Tyler’s play accounts for his contradictions because of its association of virtue with virility. It is highly significant that the author’s alter ego bears the name of “Manly.”

It is also highly significant that Tyler’s culture warrior, Colonel Manly, with his servant are involved in competitive emulation in a comedy of manners wherein they excel over the effete, Anglophile gentleman Mr. Dimple and his mannered domestic servants. The fact that the last two characters have taken British authors as their mentors speak of the author’s quest of excellence in his writing a comedy of manner, a comedic genre that his contemporaries seem to appreciate. We would add that notwithstanding the celebration and triumph of the ideology of masculinity at the end of the play, Tyler touches a cultural nerve and articulates his anxiety about American “manly virtue.” To say it in more explicit terms, Tyler makes “manly virtue” triumph through the writing and performance of a drama, whose reported success at its premiere is a cultural sign for the historically inevitable evolution of the American culture and society toward that luxurious way of life, which Tyler forcefully denounces as a corruptible foreign, cultural import. Thus, Tyler the playwright turned vocal advocate for cultural independence is trapped in a contradiction from which escape is nearly impossible. Surely, with The contrast, Tyler has entered the pantheon of American letters, but his ideology of cultural nationalism contains deep-seated flaws as regards issues of social class and gender.
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