

**Homogenizing the Masses:
American Republican Ideology and the Threat
of “intemperate democracy” in Robert Munford’s
The Patriots (c. 1777)**

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The creation of the American nation and the spread of American nationalism relied heavily upon a homogenizing social philosophy that extolled liberty and equality and united all citizens in the promotion and demonstration of public and private virtue. However, despite the much-advertised “self-evident” truths, early American society was tormented by fears of internal dissension and the cultural disruption of an “unqualified” mass of non-Americans. This paper examines how the concepts of the “individual” and the “mass” were implicated in the ideological mechanisms of the political ideology of republicanism which tended to smooth over the nuances and complexities of a hardly acknowledged ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society. By focusing on Robert Munford’s post-revolutionary satire *The Patriots* (c. 1777) as the only dramatic attempt of the time that exposed the limits and contradictions of the republican experiment, this paper will probe into the ideological illusionism of republicanism and explore the reality of the nativist exclusiveness of American society and the rigid boundaries of the American political identity.

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-born, the other the mass of people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government. . . . Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy.

Alexander Hamilton¹

1. Hamilton qtd. in Wilmer 55.

Alexander Hamilton's words betray his intense skepticism about the ability of the people to handle the political power granted them in a democratic society. A leading figure in the post-revolutionary era, Hamilton shared with other Federalists a strong belief in a central government of propertied upper-class individuals continually on guard against any democratic excesses due to the people's participation in the new nation's political life and decision-making. Although the American Revolution had mobilized a large number of people from different social and cultural backgrounds through a homogenizing political rhetoric that relied heavily upon the concepts of liberty, equality, and virtue, the question of what kind of society would emerge as a result of the Revolution seems to have puzzled the Founding Fathers of the new nation. Despite the much-advertized "self-evident" truths, early American society was tormented by fears of internal dissension and the possibility of cultural disruption by an "unqualified" mass of people. These fears were interpreted as threats against liberty, order, and social cohesion and betrayed the schizoid state of the American society of the time which, on the one hand, agonized over the nation's political reversion to the ideology of individual authority and elitist privilege, and, on the other, obstinately resisted the onslaught of "intemperate democracy."

Robert Munford's political drama, aptly named *The Patriots* (c. 1777), is situated within this context of ideological ambiguity and political divisiveness that permeated the social structure of the emerging American nation. Written at a time of sweeping social and political changes, *The Patriots* begins to question the nationalistic character of the American Revolution, its social, rather than political impact. Unlike John Adams, one of the leading figures of the Revolution, who stressed the Revolution's peculiarly intellectual character and defined it as a primarily ideological struggle, Munford approaches the American Revolution as a social conflict that gave rise to new antagonisms and forms of struggle in American society. The play's significance and major difference from the rest of the political drama produced at the time lie precisely in the fact that it is not just another dramatic recounting of specific historical moments of the military conflict between the colonists and the British or an emotion-laden juxtaposition between freedom and oppression, democracy and tyranny.² In Munford's play, the intensely emotional political rhetoric

2. Munford's play avoids the simple dualistic conflict of the political/ military struggle between America and England, and rather boldly exposes an inherently American social phenomenon—the patriotic hysteria that had seized a great part of the American citizens who favoured patriotic hyperbole as the only evidence for loyalty to the revolutionary cause.

of the Revolution, which subordinated individual interests to a greater common good and stressed America's millennial vision of the future, proves to be just a façade designed to hide a public political world in disarray. The play raises fundamental questions about the ideological illusionism of republicanism and the discourse of unity and consensus among Americans. In *The Patriots*, the British are no longer the easily identifiable "other" that threatens the security and viability of a unified American nation. Rather, the real danger comes from within the fissures in the social structure of American society, from the essential discrepancy between a strong political tendency to maintain order and control and an ideological openness that encouraged inclusiveness, mobility, and a new concept of social democracy.

Although *The Patriots* was probably never produced,³ it has been characterized as one of the best written plays prior to Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) and Munford as America's earliest writer of comic drama. According to Walter J. Meserve, Munford, more than any other dramatist during the Revolution, was "concerned with the structure of his plays, the patterned development of plot and action, and the creation of interesting caricatures" (86), while Norman Philbrick has stressed the play's theatrical vigor "that raises it above a simple pastiche of sentimental comedy or a routine farce" (262).⁴ Munford wrote two plays, *The Candidates*, a satire on the manner in which elections are run and won with references to local events and practices, and *The Patriots*, a five-act comedy, concerned with a parochial strife within the colony of Virginia and the new social hierarchies and class distinctions that inevitably began to emerge as the aftermath of the Revolution.

Munford had both the education and the necessary theatrical experience to write well-structured comedies that followed the aesthetic conventions of

3. Munford has been noted mainly as a prominent landowner and influential politician in Virginia, but neglected and underrated as a dramatist. *The Patriots* was written sometime between 1777 and 1779. There is no record of the play ever being produced and it was not published until 1798, several years after his death, along with his other play, *The Candidates*. Richard R. Beeman notes that Munford's plays "stand out as two of the most important attempts by a colonial American to use traditional dramatic techniques to illustrate distinctively American characters and themes" (169).

4. The play is a successful combination of farce and eighteenth-century sentimental comedy equal in merit to its British counterparts, like *The Beaux Stratagem* and *The Recruiting Officer*. Munford uses various clichés of plotting and characterization, and melodramatic elements such as mistaken identities, reformation of a rake, and discovery of a long-lost heiress. Romantic scenes between three sets of lovers from different social levels and farcical episodes intrude into Munford's political ideas and occasional polemical statements providing comic relief.

many English plays of the period and showed a remarkable degree of wit and humor. Born into a wealthy family, he was educated in England where his social position and connections ensured him “a law internship with king’s attorney Peyton Randolph, and an advantageous military commission during the Seven Years’ War in America” (McDonnell 240). After the War, he settled into the life of a planter on his provocatively named estate, “Richland.” Within a few years, he had become one of the biggest land and slave owners in Virginia and had made inroads into distinguished social and political positions.⁵ With the outbreak of political and economic friction with England, Munford became an active supporter of the revolutionary cause and was soon made head of the Mecklenburg County Militia. Although *The Patriots* has been noted for its “[p]eculiarly non-partisan view of the struggle” (Moody 140), it reveals the writer’s keen awareness of the subversive power of what Alexis de Tocqueville has called “democratic revolution.” Munford sensed that the transition from monarchy to democracy would cause confusion and conflict and disrupt the traditional power structures in American society by encouraging the formation of new social relations. Although as Strut, one of the “violent patriots” in the play, vehemently exclaims: “United we stand, divided we fall, is the American motto, you know” (280), Munford’s drama functions as a harbinger of the impending social, political, and cultural antagonisms that began to emerge as a result of the prevalence of what Laclau and Mouffe have called an “egalitarian imaginary”⁶ and the inevitable conflict about who will have control over social and political structures. Lurking behind these concerns is Munford’s plea for political moderation and his own anxiety over the dissolution of class hierarchy and the inability of both the leaders and the citizens of the new nation to combine independence and self-restraint. This is probably the reason why historians of early American drama have characterized Munford as conservative and neutralist, or even “the literary champion of the values of Virginia aristocracy” (Beeman 183). Whether or not *The Patriots* sprang out of Munford’s own fear and insecurity, or his divided allegiances between his political decision to support the revolutionary cause and

5. See Beeman, and Sydnor

6. Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of “the extension of the democratic revolution to a whole new series of social relations” (160) can be applied to the American society of the late-eighteenth century and the republican rhetoric that promoted an “egalitarian imaginary” (160) as class antagonisms and politico-economic struggles began to poke through the theoretical coherence of the “common sense” ideology of equality, justice, and in-subordination to monarchic rule that had framed the political logic of the American revolution in the first place.

his inbred adherence to Britain, it is, nevertheless, the only play written at the time that penetrates the “egalitarian imaginary” and criticizes the new republican order that was beginning to take shape.

In *The Patriots*, the demarcating line between the public and the private has been blurred as social relations have become intensely politicized. In the opening scene of the play, the two Virginia gentlemen, aptly named Trueman and Meanwell, stress the interactive force between public and private life mixing politics and love as they lament the “many temporary evils” that confuse their unsteady society (269). Trueman is not only accused of being a Tory, but he is also denied the hand of his beloved Mira because of his supposed deviance from the revolutionary cause. Mira’s father, Brazen, not of the same social class as the genteel Trueman and Meanwell, exemplifies Munford’s definition of patriotism as a concept that can be variously interpreted to suit personal interests and ambitions. As Trueman explains, Brazen

understands little or nothing beyond a dice-box and race-field, but thinks he knows every thing; and woe be to him that contradicts him! His political notions are a system of perfect anarchy, but he reigns in his own family with perfect despotism. He is fully resolved that nobody shall tyrannize over him, but very content to tyrannize over others. (267)

Without knowing the meaning of the word, Brazen advertises himself as a “violent patriot,” totally misinterpreting democracy and freedom and exhausting his patriotic zeal in the persecution of innocent citizens on unfounded accusations of Toryism. Meanwell laments the fact that “all heads are not capable of receiving the benign influence of the principles of liberty—some are too weak to bear it, and become thoroughly intoxicated” (268). Through his portrait of Brazen and the other “violent patriots” that comprise the local committee, Munford voices his skepticism about the maturity of the American nation to implement the apparently ripe political thought of republicanism into a social system that would shield itself against “men who aim at power without merit” and “conceal the meanness of their souls by noisy and passionate speeches” (268).

While revolutionary plays, such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *The Battle of Bunkers-Hill* (1776), Mercy O. Warren’s *The Adulateur* (1773), and John Leacock’s *The Fall of British Tyranny* (1773), reduce the complex socio-political parameters of the Revolution to an oversimplified pattern of Manichean binarisms (freedom and slavery, democracy and tyranny, patriot-

ism and treason), Munford's play undermines their view of a consensual, harmonious patriot movement as it portrays a society torn apart by internal divisions. In his seminal study on the creation and spread of nationalism, Benedict Anderson has explained that nation is "imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). The patriotic rhetoric of the revolutionary drama promoted a unifying national identity that tended to mask social and cultural divisions by symbolically taking Americans to a new stage of confidence where national unity, social virtue, and imperial ambition were all harmoniously represented. Plays like Brackenridge's, Warren's, and Leacock's, among others, fused the most fundamental narrative constituting America's national mythology—the Edenic myth of America as the place where the colonists' Christian dream of a "city upon a hill" will be fulfilled—with the myth of national redemption, the idea of America as a redeemer nation destined to fight evil/ tyranny (in the face of Britain) and instil moral righteousness. In their plays, the Revolution is treated as a moral/ historical moment, a moment that provides an unbreakable metaphorical bond that unites all the Americans, as a distinct people, to their common heritage and their mythical dream of the future. The moral energy that lies in the sub-text of these plays theoretically helps to transcend social/ cultural distinctions and class barriers and create a sense of national homogeneity.

The writers of the patriotic drama of the time show an amazing skill in popularizing the political rhetoric of republicanism and appealing to the people's intrinsic longing for words that express faith in the future and create an illusory framework of comradeship. In Warren's *The Adulateur*, for example, the Patriots are thinly disguised political figures of the time, such as James Otis (Brutus) and Samuel Adams (Cassius), who appear as heroic Roman citizens fighting against tyranny and oppression. In Warren's, as in the rest of the patriotic drama of the revolutionary period, there is an explicit tendency to create a popular mode of address embracing the common citizens and encouraging them to view themselves as participants in the political life of the community.⁷ All Americans stand united against the threat of a tyrannical social order and rally to massive civil disobedience to protect liberty and democracy. In the preface to Leacock's play, for example, the Goddess of Liberty appeals to all the citizens of America:

7. For a comprehensive account of the various ideological sources and traditions that influenced American revolutionary writing, see Bailyn.

Hail! Patriots, hail! By me inspired be!
Speak boldly, think and act for Liberty.
United sons, America's choice band,
Ye Patriots firm, ye sav'ours of the land.
Build a strong tow'r, whose fabric may endure,
Firm as a rock, from tyranny secure. (288)

Considering the real challenge of promoting a nationalist struggle for independence and formulating a new national identity, the patriotic plays of the time projected the image of an uncomplicated, homogeneous social order based solely upon moral, self-reliant individuals. As a matter of fact, the dramatic literature of the revolutionary period was part of a vast cultural effort to obviate conflicts, in any form, and secure national consensus on the transition from conservative resistance to revolutionary action against British imperial rule. Its language of many levels and intellectual modes was actually the language of the colonial elite and was designed specifically to facilitate agreement among a divided citizenry, or, to borrow the term from Raymond Williams, to command assent among the "determining base." Munford's *The Patriots* breaks through the disinterested mien and inclusive tone of the patriotic plays and exposes what these plays tried very carefully to conceal: the gaps and inconsistencies in the ideology of republicanism. Munford moves away from the metaphors of millennial prophesy and republican regeneration, and focuses upon the startling discrepancy that eventually emerged from the delicate situation that the American elite faced when they realized that, although, so far, they had had to solicit the support of the ordinary citizens, now, they had to find ways to minimize the people's role in shaping the political and social life of the new nation.

The Patriots offers a dark assessment of a social order that appears divided and unstable. Aware of the fragility of republics and the experimental nature of the American democratic venture, Munford appears to be essentially preoccupied with the unity of the American people, with what seemed to be a revolutionary consensus. As Laclau and Mouffe have eloquently observed, "under the pretext of achieving the unity of the people, the social division made visible by the logic of democracy is thereupon denied" (187). In Munford's play, the revolutionary rhetoric of liberty, equality, and unity, can no longer hide the internal divisions of American society. On the contrary, it has magnified social differences and grievances as members of previously uninvolved social groups have reached positions of political power and public authority, and as conservative gentlemen, like Munford himself, fear that they are about to lose the privileges of their social status. In *The Patriots*, Paine's

emotional plea to “every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling” begins to evaporate as the struggle for social visibility and power overrides the importance of political allegiance and identity (631).

Munford’s main satiric target is the local committee charged with the responsibility of enforcing patriotic ideology and persecuting individuals supposedly inimical to patriot interests. Consisting of hot-headed patriots on a witch-hunt for suspected Tories and British sympathizers, Munford’s committee is a fearful local instrument of interrogation, a loud example of the usurpation of political power by the people in the name of democracy. According to historical information, these committees were formed in the early years of the Revolution to “facilitate the transfer of power from the faltering colonial administration into the hands of the patriots” (Canby 437). However, it wasn’t long before the Committees of Safety, as they were called, exceeded their original authority and performed extralegal activities sanctioned by the revolutionary fervor and rhetoric.⁸ In this sense, the Committees of Safety welcomed members from social groups outside the circles of the colonial elite whose patriotic zeal had carried them into public office during the revolutionary crisis. Contemptuously referred to as “little democracies” (279) by Trueman and Meanwell, these committees were invested with the power not only to confiscate property, but also to arrest, convict, and inquire “into the lives of individuals toward whom committee members had been wont to defer by virtue of their wealth or class position” (Richards 106). Munford makes it pretty clear that this is not so much a political but rather a social-class issue. As Meanwell regrettably explains, “both property and character lie at the mercy of those tribunals” (279). Under the pretence of reconstituting the republican ideal and reviving revolutionary memories, the members of these committees disrupt traditional forms of deference by turning against Virginia gentlemen, questioning their political allegiance and challenging their status. Munford seems to identify completely with Trueman’s and Meanwell’s predicament. He, too, was soundly repudiated for his conservative leadership by the freeholders of Mecklenburg County. Although, as member of the House of Burgesses, Munford had signed the Associations of 1769, 1770, and 1774, he preached caution and moderation adopting a less vehement stance, thus increasingly finding himself out of step with his fellow citizens (Baine; McDonnell).

8. Besides Robert Munford, two other American playwrights incorporated such committees in their dramatic material. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in “Landscapes” (no date) and Judith S. Murray, in *The Traveller Returned* (1796), use the committees to criticize patriotic hypocrisy.

For Munford, the lack of political moderation threatens the whole fabric of American society as social hierarchy since the natural order of civil society has been disrupted not only by the war itself, but by the dissolution of class distinctions.⁹ The republican rhetoric of the American Revolution aimed primarily at the ideological construction of an “American consensus” that would ideally downplay class and social conflicts and would facilitate the Whig elite in the fulfilment of its political and economic objectives. The fact, however, remained that the discourse on the promise of domestic virtue and public morality could not dispel the elite’s fear that the lower classes’ newly-acquired access to power would lead to social upheaval. As James Otis, the influential pamphleteer of the Revolution, and, at one time, the darling of the mob, asserted, “when the pot boils, the scum will rise” (qtd. in Morris 6). The Revolution and its subsequent political manifesto, *The Declaration of Independence*, enhanced the positive meaning of such concepts as democracy and equality, but did not entirely dispel the negative potential inherent in them. The supporters of the Constitution (1787), the Federalists, took great pains to arrange the new republic in such a way so as to “[insulate] the federal government from the populist forces that had sprung up with the revolution” (Shalhope 101).

In this sense, Munford’s play raises a number of important questions: what will happen when the fervent patriotic rhetoric of the revolutionary propaganda reaches the social structures of the American society of the time and juxtaposes itself against the reality of social changes? How will Thomas Paine’s republican idealism sound when class conflicts and aspirations for social levelling and political authority divide the nation? What kind of society would emerge as a result of the Revolution? What would be the people’s proper power in a republic? And, what would be the social position of women and of several minority groups, like the Scots in Virginia for example? Munford’s play foreshadows the atmosphere of political divisiveness that followed the “consensual” revolutionary movement and led to the creation of two distinct political parties: the Federalists, who feared that the radical language of the French Revolution would have an anarchic influence on America’s misguided masses, and the Democratic-Republicans (or, Jeffersonian Republicans), who proclaimed to be more sympathetic to the interests of the many.¹⁰

9. As Richard B. Morris has stated, “while Marx and Engels in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* asserted that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,’ they regarded the American Revolution, not as a struggle of the rich against the poor, but rather as a bourgeois movement of liberation” (9-10).

10. The political divisions in the new nation became more pronounced during the 1790s when the British and French went to war. The Federalist government was closer in ad-

Just a few years after Munford's *The Patriots* was written, John Adams published *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), where he revealed his elitist views by insisting that the new government of America should be composed of "the rich, the well-born, and the able" (qtd. in Wilmer 54). Inevitably, then, a crucial distinction was made in the minds of the Federalists: it was one thing to fight for independence against England, and another to reinvent American identity and create a radically reformed society.

In *The Patriots*, one cannot but be struck by the predominant characteristics of fear and frenzy, of anxiety and bombast, of enthusiastic extravagance, and the general sense of a chaotic society out of which the utopian dream of the Revolution for the construction of a new and virtuous order is supposed to be realized. It seems that Munford's play captures the delicate situation that stemmed from the essential distinction between the political and social changes brought about by the Revolution. The former rested upon a democratic government, constitution-making, and republican institutions, while the latter, which proved incidental though integral to the movement, led to the increasing fragmentation of the American society along class and ethnic lines. At the very moment of independence, Munford's play presents an American nation that suffers from a sort of social stress as the grandiose and feverish rhetoric of the Revolution has turned into an obsession with disorder and conspiratorial design. In the play, the wild paranoia of political bigotry and the patriotic frenzy that has seized a certain group of citizens are presented as an ill-devised effort to perpetuate the illusion of the "unity" of the people and to justify the people's claim to power. The members of the local committee fear that political dissension might lead to forsaking the principles of the Revolution for a less "idealistic" social paradigm of stratification and class hierarchy. Their adherence to the republican ideals, however, takes the shape of a threat against anyone who would dare question their public authority.

In the heated atmosphere of the play, the democratic logic of the Revolution has turned awry as it is about to be transformed into mob-rule:

BRAZEN. How goes it? How goes it? Well, what business do we meet upon today?

ministration to England and depended on trade with Britain, while the Republicans embraced the values of the French Revolution and detested the continued military presence of Britain in America in violation of the 1783 Treaty of Paris. In 1786, the Federalists, under John Adams, won the election and ensured social and political stability through a strong central government.

STRUT. The Scabbies are to be tried according to the ordinance.
 BRAZEN. Let's duck the scoundrels.
 THUNDERBOLT. Duck 'em! Let's burn the scoundrels.
 SKIP. Let's hang them
 SQUIB. Ay, ay, hang them, that is the best way. (280)

Munford's fear of popular politics is confirmed by the convulsive reactions of the local committee against any "enemies" of the nation. Acting as a revengeful mob, the committee associate the social elite with the much-despised Tories and persecute their supposed betters on the basis of reinforcing the meaning of the Revolution:

SIMPLE. 'Tis a pity such clever men should be enemies to their country.
 STRUT. They are dangerous men; shew me a clever man, and I'll shew you an enemy; let me advise you to keep a strict eye upon those men. Mr. President.
 BRAZEN. D-mn all tories, say I. (287)¹¹

However, the committee's hostility is directed not only against upper-class individuals who cling to a traditional form of deference, but also against ethnic "others" whose presence in American society threatens the viability of the republican experiment. The much-advertised idea of America as an "asylum," a "refuge," "a land of opportunity" for all the oppressed people in the world is undermined in Munford's play. The incident with the Scots exposes the tension and ambivalence that surrounded the whole idea of ethnicity and nationality in the American society of the time as well as America's more general fear of "alien" groups. In the play, the Scots are forced to take the Virginia loyalty oath of 1777 and swear allegiance to the patriot cause:

STRUT. The nature of their offence, gentlemen, is, that they are Scotchmen; every Scotchman being an enemy, and these men being Scotchmen, they come under the ordinance which directs an oath to be tendered to all those against whom there is just cause to suspect they are enemies.
 MCGRIPE. I've gi'en nae cause to suspect that I am an enemy. The ordinance says, ye must hae just cause. Bring your proof, gentlemen.

11. The committee's definition of Toryism, or lack of it, is satirically presented by Munford when Brazen states, "All suspected persons are call'd tories" (287).

BRAZEN. Proof, sir! We have proof enough. We suspect any
Scotchman: suspicion is proof, sir. (282)¹²

Munford was the first to highlight the fear and uncertainty of the impending social crisis that eventually led the Federalists to offer a restrictive definition of the American national identity excluding all those they deemed unwanted or considered unworthy to be included in the body politic. The enactment of the Naturalization Law of 1790 and the passing of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798¹³ by the Federalist government of the nation confirmed the rigid boundaries of the American political identity and reflected the Federalists' growing fear over their shrinking authority in an increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse society. "Citizenship became a matter of birth, heritage, and natural allegiance in which certain ethnic backgrounds were defined as more truly American than others" (Ben-Atar and Oberg 4). As historian Gordon S. Wood has explained, "republicanism with its emphasis on spartan adversity and simplicity became an ideology of social stratification. Most Revolutionary leaders clung tightly to the concept of a ruling elite" (478). In this sense, Munford's play prefigures the Federalists' ambition that a well-trained public would authorize the elite in the arena of public leadership. So, the struggle over who would be included in the body politic was crucial in determining the nature of the new American nation. Still wavering between the polarities of aristocracy and democracy, the republican society that was beginning to take shape after the Revolution was built upon an essential paradox: it commanded "popular assent to a scheme of government which systematically excluded the common people from the more responsible positions of political power" (Beeman 170).

Munford's critique of the new republican order goes even deeper and concentrates on what seems to be a crisis within the elite itself. Contrary to the impression of confidence and stability that the Virginia planters have historically acquired, *The Patriots* exposes uneasy and embarrassing circumstances stemming from the hypocritical behavior that some members of the Virginia elite displayed for the sake of popularity. Tackabout, the worst of the

12. For a discussion of the persecution of the Scots see McDonnell 248n22.

13. According to the Naturalization Law, American citizenship was limited only to "free white persons" thus excluding Blacks, Native Americans, and the Irish, whose whiteness was seriously contested. See Jacobson 15-52. The Alien and Sedition Acts, passed eight years later, intensified the conflict between Federalists and Republicans as it sought to undercut the support Republicans gained from immigrants by extending the naturalization period for citizenship.

play's patriotic hypocrites, is a fearful symbol of democratic menace as he represents all those "gentlemen" who pretended to be in favour of the Revolution in order to avoid popular outcry but in reality undermined the very principles of republicanism by fostering deceit and sowing discord:

Where is the man that has done more than I have? I have damn'd the ministry, abus'd the king, vilified the parliament, and curs'd the Scots. I have raised the people's suspicions against all moderate men; advised them to spurn at all government: I have cried down tories, cried up whigs, extolled Washington as a god and call'd Howe a very devil. I have exclaimed against all taxes, advised the people to pay no debts; I have promised them success in war, a free trade, and independent dominion. In short, I have inspired them with the true patriotic fire, the spirit of opposition. (287)

In the mind of Tackabout, who entertains distorted ideas about democracy, order, and justice, social power depends upon the intensity of the public demonstration of patriotic passion: "Nothing but the tories can hurt us; nothing else, sir. . . . You, as president of the committee, should cite the scoundrels. Let them be stigmatized; mark them out, and it's an easy matter to set a mob upon their backs that shall drive them to the devil" (306).

Tackabout's behavior intensifies the already inflammable social relations and helps to perpetuate an atmosphere of hypocrisy and false patriotism. When, at the end of the play, he is revealed to be a Tory himself, the insidious effects of such an atmosphere become apparent as the two formerly conservative gentlemen, Trueman and Meanwell, are restored in popular opinion by joining in the patriotic frenzy and violence:

BRAZEN. (*To Trueman.*) Give me your hand, you are an honest fellow; every tory is a villain. Henceforth, all malice apart.

SIMPLE. What must be done to Mr. Tackabout?

BRAZEN. Duck him.

SKIP. Tar and feather him.

THUNDERBOLT. Advertise him.

MEANWELL. He should be duck'd, as an incendiary, tarr'd as a nuisance, feather'd as a foul traitor, hang'd –

TRUEMAN. And advertis'd as a coward. (*Kicks him.*). (315)

Throughout the play, all the characters appear to be in a process of (mis)interpreting the new political situation and social order through the prism

of their own hopes, ambitions, and limitations. And, all appear confused, or even intimidated, by the rapid turn of events and the onslaught of patriotic fervor. As Strut, for example, confesses: “By pretensions to patriotism, I became a delegate; and putting on the appearance of a man of courage, I became a colonel” (298).

Building a new nation upon democratic principles appears immensely difficult when it comes to changing the people’s mentality and putting theory into practice.¹⁴ Trueman, though content by the way things turned out both in his public and private life, does not fail to see the ludicrousness of the situation:

So in spite of all the malice and censure of the times, I am at last dubb’d a whig. I am not wiser or better than before. My political opinions are still the same, my patriotic principles unaltered: but I have kick’d a tory, it seems: there is a merit in this, which, like charity, hides a multitude of sins. (316)

Munford’s trenchant satire on the unthinking and loud assertions of patriotism does not spare women. In the play, Isabella the supposed “female patriot,” appears as disoriented, passionate, and overzealous as the members of the committee. However, her representation is particularly scathing because her “unfeminine” behavior has serious public consequences. Although the character of Isabella becomes a source of ridicule, she actually stands for a tangible threat against social order. Munford’s definition of false patriotism takes on gender connotations as Isabella exhibits characteristics traditionally attributed to women such as irrationality and unpredictability. In a patriarchal society, Isabella’s misguided notions of patriotism and democracy lead her to manipulate men on the basis of the new political role assigned to her by the republican rhetoric.¹⁵ As much as Munford appears to be anxious about the crossing of class and social lines, in the case of Isabella, he shows a most distinct uneasiness as masculine and feminine identities become blurred in the new republican order. Isabella threatens to destabilize traditional authority not because she makes undeserving claims to political power but because

14. Robert A. Ferguson has argued that the Founding Fathers, “idealistic in their assertions, put pen to paper with shabbier needs in mind. The truth may be self-evident, but people must be humored, duped, coaxed, and provoked into accepting it” (7).

15. Isabella is “resolved not to love a man who knows nothing of war and Washington,” while she thinks that “there’s something so clever in fighting and dying for one’s country; and the officers look so clever and smart; I declare I never saw an ugly officer in my life” (271).

she corrupts the very essence of republicanism, which is private and public morality. The revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and equality opened up the way for American women to step outside their prescribed feminine sphere and encouraged their sense of involvement in the public realm. As Mary Beth Norton has pointed out, “white women, who in the mid-1760s offered profuse apologies whenever they dared to discuss politics, were by the 1780s reading widely in political literature, publishing their own sentiments, engaging in heated debates over public policy” (156).¹⁶

However, in Isabella’s passionate behavior, the republican image of American women as custodians of values and promoters of public morality collapses. Toward the end of the play, Munford takes the opportunity to give vent to his own misogynistic impulses in the scene where Isabella pushes Colonel Strut to duel with Flash:

ISABELLA. Was there ever such a paltry coward? To put up with such an affront, and then stand parleying with a fellow who only apologizes for it, by abusing his mistress? Give me the sword. (*Takes the sword and runs at Flash.*)

FLASH. A man in petticoats, by God! . . . (*Runs off.*)

ISABELLA. Colonel Strut, your most obedient. Henceforth, I disclaim all connexions with you. Never dare to speak to me, nor hope ever hereafter to see my face again. This I will take as the trophy of my victory.

[*Exit with Flash’s coat.*]

STRUT. Well, I don’t know whether I am not better without her. She has such a cursed stomach for fighting, she would certainly have brought me into some scrape or other, in spite of my teeth.

*Honour’s a bubble, fame a sound
Not worth a man’s pursuing;
Women at best, are evil’s sound,
And oft bring men to ruin. (321)*

While Isabella is conveniently, yet awkwardly, removed from the play as a figure of disorder and is denied domestic happiness and social acceptance, her counterpart, Mira, is rewarded for her modesty and sense of duty with a good marriage. Functioning as Maria’s predecessor in Royall Tyler’s social

16. For a discussion of Republican women entering the predominantly male sphere of politics, see Norton and Kerber.

comedy *The Contrast* (1787), Mira is tyrannized by her father who scorns his daughter's "study" and forces her to marry Captain Flash just because he is in the army. However, she readily breaks her "filial piety" when she consents to elope with Trueman. Mira, as a character, despite her sentimental aura, bears traces of the new ideal of the republican woman who is not frowned upon when she expresses her political ideas—always in moderation, though—and seeks to prepare herself for a life of moral sufficiency. Mira's filial disobedience is justified, on the one hand, within the republican context of the Revolution that positively redefined the American woman's role as wife and mother and gave her the opportunity to exercise limited control over the choice of her marital partner, and, on the other, because she does not move outside her proper sphere of activity and agrees to marry a genteel and honorable man.

Although the play ends in a truly sentimental fashion with a double marriage and the supposed reconciliation of the characters, it leaves a taste of bitterness as the questions that Munford raised remain largely unanswered. *The Patriots* verges on the borderline separating the idealism of the republican rhetoric that reinforced a conception of America as an inclusive democracy, as articulated by Paine and Crèvecoeur for example, and the reality of the difficulty of building a nation upon the ideals of liberty, equality, democracy, and justice. Munford takes these ideals out of the theoretical framework of political ideology and attempts to capture the important consequences that their definition might have at the level of social structure where the privileges of some come into collision with the rights of others. The struggle over who will eventually come to rule in post-revolutionary American society and also who will be included in the body politic are crucial for the success of the nation-making experiment. Conservative, even anachronistic, as he appears to be in his reluctance to abandon traditional forms of power and deference and in his anxiety about the extent of popular sovereignty, Munford points toward the idea of a restrictive national identity, which was eventually adopted by the Federalists. As Munford's play suggests, the revolutionary rhetoric, filled with millennial hopes, idealist promises, and yearnings for both individual and societal improvement, would become consolidated as a political philosophy and patriotic language, important yet ambiguous, that would always be invoked, on a theoretical basis, to counter any charges that American society was too heterogeneous to make a solid republic possible and to strengthen the new nation in future struggles and moments of self-doubt.

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