

**COLUMBUS EL FILIBUSTERO:
JOHN BROUGHAM'S MIRROR OF DISCOVERY**

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John Brougham's burlesques provide a mocking, but still reliable register of mid-nineteenth century socio-political life in America. Loosely derived from Washington Irving's narrative *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* and W.H. Prescott's *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella*, *Columbus El Filibustero* is one of the most telling extravaganzas of Brougham's. Devised to provoke thought and evoke crooked smiles, Brougham's play is today an astonishing mirror of discovery into nascent "Monroe Doctrine," evolving Manifest Destiny, and unbridled filibustering.

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The Dublin-born, Irish-American actor, playwright, manager, poet, and humorist John Brougham (1810-80) wrote over 160 identifiable scripts for the stage. A major share of these — more than fifty, ten of them extant — took the form of burlesques, extravaganzas, and dramatic novelties. It is this benignly satiric vein which distinguishes his theatre pieces from those of his American contemporaries. Shakespearean tragedy, Italian opera, and "Ethiopian" minstrelsy, topical and national events, the Bloomer costume, the 1851 World's Fair in London, and current Anglo-American social issues all were objects of parody, comic punning, and local "hits."¹

Theatre chronicler John Ireland acclaimed Brougham's intricate, once widely popular *Po-ca-hon-tas* (1855) as "the most successful extravaganza ever produced in America;" and Laurence Hutton, earliest critical delineator of the American burlesque, generously styled the playwright an American Aristophanes: "His *Pocahontas* and *Columbus* are almost classics. They rank among the best, if they are not the very best burlesques in any living language. Their wit is never coarse, they ridicule nothing which is not a fit subject for ridicule, they outrage no serious sentiment, they hurt no feelings, they shock no modesty, they never blaspheme." If their power to delight is

now diminished, Brougham's burlesques and extravaganzas invite our admiration for abiding wit, even intermittent grace; and they provide a mocking, but still reliable register of mid-nineteenth-century American social, political, and cultural history.

The later ones, conspicuously *Columbus El Filibustero !!* (1857), comprise psychobarometers of the comedian's own moods — alternately detached, perplexed, and anguished — as the democratic ideal disintegrated into bloody sectional conflict and endured a tormented aftermath. Brougham departed the United States in 1860, spent the Civil War years in England and on his return retitled (and otherwise altered) his 1857 play *Columbus Reconstructed*. In this paper I examine extant pre- and postwar versions (at Princeton University Library); notice the script's unabashed anachronisms and insouciant neglect of Indians and Negroes — though not of slavery; explicate its so-called local 1857 "hits" from Tammany-ruled Manhattan, from Kansas ("with her bloody nose"), and from embattled Utah Territory; and follow its unremitting appeals to democracy and freedom. Brougham's mirror of discovery also palpably reflects its troubled era.

Columbus was the extravaganza in which the aging actor-playwright reputedly "took the most pleasure." It is an almost formless patriotic pageant, loosely derived from Washington Irving's popular narrative *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828) and historian William H. Prescott's *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1837) — to which the play's "great navigator" pointedly refers on page 13 of the published script: "Could this mean king, unless by my deserving / Awake the genius of a Prescott or an Irving?" The extravaganza formula (cf. the Italian *stravaganza*, connoting a relative looseness of style and fantastic story material) was a legacy from the dramatist's youthful, cordial association with Lucy Eliza Vestris and Charles Mathews' celebrated Olympic Theatre, London, 1831-42, when J. R. Planché was his genial mentor in the niceties of this urbane stage genre. Sevillanos might liken extravaganza to the Iberian "género chico" zarzuela — a sort of "lesser genre." *Columbia at Home* (1852) had been Brougham's earlie American experiment in neo-Olympian extravaganza. *Po-ca-hon-tas* was heralded upon its publication, by a *New York Times* reviewer, as "the first attempt (of any importance) of the kind... in this country." Both this piece and *Columbus* burlesqued their received story traditions in a mock-heroic manner; introduced songs set to popular music (embracing grand opera, Negro minstrelsy, and folk tunes); and interlarded the dialogue and songs with as many puns and local allusions as possible.

Three decades after its première, Laurence Hutton could still admire *Columbus'* almost classic style, subtle satire, and delicate thought: "It...is pathetic rather than uproariously funny. While *Pocahontas* inspires nothing but laughter, *Columbus* excites sympathy, and oftentimes has moved his audiences to the verge of tears" (1890). Constance Rourke, earliest of

twentieth-century Americanists to unearth Brougham's play, found it "more cynically pointed and also more human than his other burlesques" (1931); while David S. Hawes, in his Brougham dissertation (Stanford, 1953), also remarked the serious intent underlying *Columbus*' comic idea.

Assembled in "two acts and four centuries," *Columbus* begins at the (reified) Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella, where the royal pair are lustily, dutifully complimented in song (to an opera chorus from Gustavus — Auber's *Gustave III*) (3). Subsequent set-pieces and choruses were derived from Balfe's *The Enchantress*, Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, O' Keeffe's *The Poor Soldier*, Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and *Rigoletto*, Weber's *Der Freischutz*, Sterling's melodrama *Jeannette and Jeannot*, the Scotch air "The Quaker's Wife," James Sanford's "Ethiopian" favorite "Lucy Neal," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Yankee Doodle," and "Hail, Columbia" (Joseph Hopkinson's text, set to "The President's March"). Brougham's six-segment, "historico-plagiaristic" vocal *mélange* of Act Two, commemorating 1857's "Hard times, hard times," evokes the Planché-style topical revue; although Planché (by reason largely of official censorship) had never exercised the extravaganza formula with such unretouched, warts-and-all political abandon as Brougham.

Informed by the Vigilance Committee of a poor, map-peddling Genoan flat-boat captain named Columbus, who claims the world is round and speaks of a corresponding, undiscovered half-world populated by mortals and rich with gold and gems, the King summons the stranger before him; and the explorer makes his court debut in quasi-operatic pidgin-Italian. The venal Ferdinand is captivated by Columbus' promise of "the golden key" and, emulating the ravenous tactics of "our friends in Erie" (i.e., Jim Fisk and Jay Gould), agrees to back his filibustering venture (8):

COL. : Craft I must have to sail in.
 KING. : "Quantum suf."
 Once you're in Wall street, you' ll find craft enough.

 We'll call our company - "the *Anti-Panic*
Perpetual Gold Producing Oceanic..."

The historical Ferdinand, by contrast, had been less accommodating — Irving (*Life*, Ch.8), for example, writes that "King Ferdinand looked coolly on the affair." Archdeacon Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, described (2) as "naturally opposed to Columbus and the spread of knowledge," is the hero's outspoken rival; whereas Fernando de Talavera, Prior of Prado and confessor of the Queen, is his sympathetic advocate (5): "I read his anxious fears." Brougham thus reassigns the historical Talavera's ecclesiastical skepticism (Prescott, *History* Ch. 16) to Fonseca; and he transposes real-life Fonseca's jealousy and "implacable hostility" (Irving Ch. 16) from post- to pre-

discovery — Columbus' first meeting with the monarchs. Queen Isabella's quintessential role in financing Columbus' venture (e.g. Irving, Prescott) is entirely, deliberately suppressed in Brougham's script.

The Spanish King appears throughout the play as an emblem of greed, imperialist filibustering, unbridled corporate depredation, and market speculation (notably in railroad stock), such as had triggered the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company's bankruptcy (August 24, 1857), consequent bank and business failures, and the Panic of 1857. He makes explicit reference (9) to "our new filibustering association," then (11) presents a token of royal approbation: "And that in stealing gold you may not cease,/ Receive the order of the 'Golden Fleece'." The filibuster William Walker, whose 1857 Nicaraguan expedition was thwarted by his former partner "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt (after he betrayed Vanderbilt by annulling his American Accessory Transit Company's charter), had planned to create a strong, federated state out of the five Central American republics. As Brougham's focal filibustering allusions and metaphors here imply, Walker's connection with powerful New York financial interests — before he broke with Vanderbilt — were closer than those he then and afterwards held with Southern proslavery men.

In this opening scene, Brougham's hero counters Ferdinand's stockjobbing pitch (9), "Profits enormous, and the outlay small," with a gloomy self-assessment: "An old man's wearied life, perhaps, that's all."² He shortly, soberly assesses the hazards of his unequal bargain with the King (12): "On one side, enterprise, toil, danger, death!/ And on the other, mouthfuls of mere breath." But, taking heart, he *Flings away maps and stands abstracted*, mystically forecasting the destiny of a still undiscovered continent (9-11). He lyrically surveys New World landscape ("From ice bound tracts to... tropic sun"), exalts its abundant, varied produce ("Uncounted acres of life-giving grain," "I see plantations, thickly overgrown... / A revenue of millions!") and mineral wealth ("... great heaps of gold, / Uncared for, lie in affluence untold"), celebrates its commerce ("Towns, swol'n to cities"); and sees brave science and technology subdue the elements ("On iron ways... Impelling mighty freights, by vapor driven; / Or with electric nerves to interlace / The varied points of universal space"). But Columbus also soberly envisions an inexorable pollution of transatlantic Paradise (11):

The plethora of wealth
Corrupt and undermine the general health.
I see vile madd'ning fumes incite to strife,
Obscure the sense and whet the murderer's knife.
I see dead rabbits.

Whereupon, as though daunted by Columbus' clairvoyant, muckraking revelations, the King interrupts him.

The year 1857 marked a period of rampant crime and disorder across the nation and one of New York City's most riotous eras. "In one day, five or six murders and deeds of violence occurred," historian James Grant Wilson grimly records, "a mutiny on shipboard, and robberies in the public streets." On one occasion the Dead Rabbits (a ruthless Tammany gang) took possession of the City Hall for an hour, nearly beat to death one of their opponents in front of the Mayor's office, and filled the courts of justice with their shouts and execrations. Democratic Mayor Fernando Wood was obliged to call out the police to protect him from his friends and drive them off. A citizens party (cf. the play's Vigilance Committee) was formed and held great public meetings. But of American dramatists then writing, only Brougham ventured to invoke such explicit, concrete details on the stage, and to devise effective dramaturgic mechanisms for doing so.

In Scene Two (12-15), a bedchamber in the Palace, the explorer downs a gin toddy, savors in soliloquy his imminent prospect of undying fame and bids the yawning, robed, and night-capped Spanish King goodnight. Columbus falls asleep in a chair pondering how a future playwright — i.e., Brougham — in dramatizing his rude adventures, "could find a heroine." The dream-vision of Columbia forthwith appears to him, garbed in her familiar Phrygian cap and flowing gown of *Armed Freedom* ("Crawford's sculptured goddess"), "... *in luminous opening at back — comes forward and touches Columbus.*" She will accompany him on his epochal voyage and back again, and promises to protect him from harm en route. The scene ends as Columbia displays an American flag and Columbus sings a chauvinistic recast of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

In Scene Three (15-18), the deck of the *Santa Maria*, Columbus and Columbia quell a threatened mutiny of the striking, singing chorus of impatient mariners. Columbus counsels his protégé that land is near; crew members fish from the sea a pumpkin pie, a knobby walking-stick inscribed with the name of Tammany sachem Marshall Rynders, and a Burton's Theatre play-bill.³ The steamship *Adriatic* then passes across the scene, with Dodsworth's Band playing "Yankee Doodle;" and Columbus at last espies land, which Columbia identifies as "Coney Island!" with a friendly, strangely attired welcoming committee ("*Crowd of citizens*"). "*Castle Garden extends itself from the Battery. Pier No. 1 appears, crowded with Reception Committee, & co. Columbus laded with the usual honors. 'That Gun' takes its usual noisy part in the demonstration. Columbus is surrounded by enthusiastic admirers. Columbia remains unnoticed in the background. Banners displayed on which are inscribed 'Columbus for Mayor,' 'The People's Choice,' 'Columbus for Governor' — 'Down with anybody else,' 'Columbus for President' 'Liberty for ever,' 'Who dare oppose us.'*"

The dockside crowd's display of politics as usual — Columbus wildly acclaimed, and Columbia/Freedom neglected — culminating in an "*infernal [musical] row ... by the antagonistic politicians,*" obliquely betokened

rancorous sectional division over slavery in the American South. In the year of *Columbus'* advent, a doughface Democratic President James Buchanan, in his Inaugural Address, had urged the need to preserve the nation's "free institutions" and affirmed popular sovereignty, then called on all who loved the Union "to suppress [antislavery] agitation;" the Bourbon U.S. Chief Justice, Roger B. Taney, had decreed against Dred Scott's liberty on free American soil; Virginian George Fitzhugh's proslavery *Cannibals All!* had assailed "ruthless northern capitalism;" and North Carolinian Hinton R. Helper's carefully reasoned *The Impending Crisis of the South* had fueled the Republican Party's dogged antislavery campaign.

In the brief concluding Act (19-24), in a now empty palace, Columbus' triumphal return to Spain provides occasion for more local "hits" (the undraped Model Artists, cotton speculation, bills sent from Beck's and Tiffany's, the Panic) and a "*singular vocal mélange*" (cynical songs set to favorite operatic themes, popular tunes, and national anthems). An opening Fonseca-Ferdinand exchange also commemorates the monarchs' concurrent, cruel expulsion of Jews from Spain (19-20):

FONSECA.: Well, let's see, Sire — if you have the leisure
You might, combining piety and pleasure,
Cook a few heretics.

KING.: (*Rising up.*) That *would* drive off the blues!
I could enjoy a dozen roasted Jews...

The heralded explorer marches in, arraying exotic New World natives, fauna, and artifacts (cf. Irving, Ch. 15; Prescott, Ch.18) as an elaborate transatlantic procession: "*A group of Indian slipper and smoking-cap sellers, with their banner. A glass ballot box, carried by a politician of character, supported by a few distinguished members of the dead Rabbit Club. The Prince of Humbugs (Phineas T. Barnum), mounted on a superbly-caparisoned woolly horse and attended by a live mermaid and the nurse of Washington. Two Ethiopians, bearing respectively a mint julep and a sherry cobbler. Cuttle, Sleek, and Toodles [William E. Burton's popular roles], arm-in-arm. King Powhatan, Pocahontas, and John Smith [focal characters in Brougham's burlesque]. The Almighty Dollar, in regal robes and promiscuously attended.*" (This local/topical procession, no longer timely in 1866, was apparently dropped from performances of *Columbus Reconstructed*).

Columbia's democratic, energetic hand-shaking with their majesties provokes great consternation among the assembled court; and Columbus and the stuffy Cardinal (*sic*) Fonseca urge the invariable Old World rules of kneeling before royalty. "My constitution wouldn't stand it," she demurs. The disunion theme is next symbolically theatricalized via allegorical masque. In the 1857 script, a beauty-pageant parade of "*all the Stated, represented by beautiful young ladies,*" is interrupted by the noisy arrival of bloody-nosed

Little Miss Kansas, attended by a torch-wielding Imp of Discord. "I told her she would have to wait a cure," Columbia objects, "And when her Constitution could endure/ Fatigue, she might come in." Kansas' entrance precipitates "*great confusion among the States*" (which regroup into Northern, Southern, and Western factions), until Columbia drives off Discord, and harmony can be restored.

In *Columbus Reconstructed*, Miss Kansas is individually supplanted by the "rather precocious" Miss Colorado, who similarly "flatters herself that she's a full-grown state." Discord again foments a momentary tumult among the admitted States, until "*Columbia flings him down and the States are reconciled. Tableau in yellow fire.*"⁴

As Columbia presents her "children" to the King, however, she acknowledges she also has another, unruly "babe in 'arms,'" Miss Utah. Brougham evidently took a dim view of Utah's unyielding claims of entitlement to both plural marriage and statehood. "But we soon shall cure her ills," mother Columbia warns, "With some steel drops and "Harney's leaden-pills." The topical Utah allusions would be dropped from *Columbus Reconstructed* (that territory was not admitted until 1896).

Columbus' apocryphal "egg wager" (interpolated by Washington Irving Ch. 15) that none among the Spanish court can make an egg stand on end — "*They individually try the experiment, which is a failure all round*" — leads to the extravaganza's final patriotic tableau. "*The [much magnified] egg of Columbus ... changes to the Temple of Fame.*" The "American celebrities" pyramidally ranged therein (and illuminated by "red fire") are elaborated in the *Columbus Reconstructed* prompt script: Toward the "top" (well upstage), surmounted by Columbia and flanked by a plow and an anvil, stood George Washington; just below, flanked by two cannons, were Generals Greene, W[arren], and P[utnam]; and the lowermost platform was occupied by two Indians (R. & L.), Lady Peru, Indies, and — at center — Columbus. In the tableau for *Columbus Reconstructed* (my sole source for the foregoing), Washington was flanked by Union Generals Sherman (R) and Sheridan (L). Two equal groupings of 18 States (young women) flanked the celebrities pyramid, headed respectively by New York (down R) and Massachusetts (down L). Miss Colorado was recumbent at center stage, in front of Columbus.

"The patriotic sentiments fell upon good soil," the *New York Times* captiously reported in July 1866, following the arrival of *Columbus Reconstructed*, "clapitous patriotism being quite cheap nowadays." The chauvinistic pro-Unionism is now perhaps more obvious (Confederate military leaders are conspicuous by their absence from the postbellum pantheon); and Brougham's cautious amalgam of Columbian claptrap and social criticism may be more readily discernible than it was originally.⁵ Brougham's allegorical Miss Kansas and the provocative, torch-bearing Imp

of Discord, his balletic grouping of female personifications of States into divided sections, and his 1866 representation of both Sherman and Sheridan — *in propria persona* — should thus appear the more remarkable.

The "clapitous patriotism" of Brougham's ante- and postbellum Columbus scripts was disarmingly integrated into an at once congenial and critical theatrical matrix. In discussing Act I, Scene 3, I referred to the dramatist's "calculated trans-temporal juxtapositions" — the time-honored device of Planché's burlesques and of frontier humor. The municipal corruption, Wall Street speculation, and urban violence which inform Brougham's local "hits" were urgent, not trivial matters. Accordingly, his transmuting and transposing these topics into the Spanish court was inspired — and satirically effective. In one respect, Brougham's unsparing stage treatment of mounting sectional division in *Columbus El Filibustero* and his backward glance at the American Civil War in *Columbus Reconstructed* were possible (amid pervasive dramaturgic self-censorship) by reason of the step-by-step softening-up process inherent in his series of trans-temporal topical *mélanges* — alternately as allusion, as dialogue, and surpassingly as tableaux.

His key metaphor here is probably "filibuster." The discreetly, palpably antislavery extravaganza is persistently, intentionally anachronistic and apochryphal — devised, then as now, to provoke thought and evoke crooked smiles. Brougham's script is today an astonishing mirror of discovery into nascent "Monroe Doctrine," evolving Manifest Destiny, and unbridled expansionist filibustering.

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Notes

1. I describe many of these productions in "John Brougham: The Gentle Satirist," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, December 1959.
2. The historical Columbus, in fact, had been 33 years old upon his first arrival at the Spanish Court.
3. Brougham's calculated trans-temporal juxtapositions here are loosely based on factual analogues — Irving reports, ch. 10, that the discoverers had observed "a green [coastal] fish,... and a branch of thorn with berries on it; [and] they picked up, also, a reed, a small board, and, above all, a staff artificially carved."
4. Colorado had belatedly attained territorial status in 1861; but President Andrew Johnson vetoed the Statehood bill in 1867; and the bustling territory did not become a state until 1876.
5. When Detroit playwright Bronson Howard obtained a production of his Civil War script *Feds and Confeds* October 1, 1869, at the Louisville Opera House, a *Courier-Journal* reviewer doubted "the propriety of playing these sort of pieces;"

and the *Evening Express* urged that such presentations "can do no possible good, and may do harm by stirring up once more bad blood."

* Due to Pat Ryan's sudden death we have been unable to collect full bibliographical data for a complete bibliography as done with all the other essays included in this volume.



Το έργο του John Brougham είναι μία σαρκαστική αλλά και συνάμα δηλωτική και έγκυρη εικόνα της κοινωνικο-πολιτικής πραγματικότητας της Αμερικής στα μέσα του 19ου αιώνα. Με σαφείς επιδράσεις από το έργο του Washington Irving *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* και του W.H.Prescott *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella* ο Brougham ολοκληρώνει το έργο του *Columbus El Filibustero*, όπου μεταξύ άλλων καυτηριάζει τα κακώς κείμενα της κοινωνίας που ζει και παράλληλα προσφέρει και για τους μεταγενέστερους μία πολύ ενδιαφέρουσα εικόνα των πραγμάτων λίγο πριν και λίγο μετά τον εμφύλιο πόλεμο.