Etudes: an online theatre & performance studies journal for emerging scholars

Sentimentalism and the Stage: Reading and the American Identity in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*

By J.K. Rogers

Abstract

With the emergence of the novel as a literary genre during the eighteenth century, a new dimension was added to theatrical performances. Thus, when looking at a play such as Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), the act of reading contained therein becomes a discursive way in which the character of the American national identity becomes defined. A comparison of the popular British works used within Tyler's play provides much of the contrast from which the play gets its name, and as such, helps to illustrate the early American struggle to separate from England after the American Revolution. An examination of the selected literature within Tyler's play reveals a unique perspective on the development of the American National Identity. Additionally, the epistemological nature of how these works were included on the stage provides a concrete representation of the contrast between the newly-formed ideologies of early America and those of Europe and England.

Etudes Vol. 3 No. 1
January 2018
ISSN 2375-0758
www.etudesonline.com

Sentimentalism and the Stage: Reading and the American Identity in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*

By J.K. Rogers

During and after the years of the American Revolution, the struggle to find a national identity was a significant part of the United States emerging as a political and cultural entity. This struggle is clearly delineated in the theatrical offerings of the time. First and foremost was the desire to break from English and Continental traditions while developing a unique patriotic voice, and yet a break from European custom was not that simple. Joseph Roach notes that one of the aspects of the "earlier history of the American theatre is its bogus and sycophantic anglophilia,"[1] that was in turn combined with the "American hatred of tyranny" to form hypocritical acts of "snobbery" that can most certainly be classified as a "particularly obnoxious subcategory" of that same tyranny (340). Roach continues, saying that "the custom of defining what is or is not American by comparison to Great Britain, improvised in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, later takes on the golden penumbra of a creation myth" (341) and supplying a caveat that the differences between early American drama and British theatre from the same era are so minute as to be inconsequential. However, as inconsequential as these differences may be, the fact remains that these early American plays serve as initial representatives of the American break from British ideology. Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787) was not only the first successful play by an American about American interests, it also established a performative model for the Stage American, thus introducing

[1] Roach writes in reference to Mark Twain's satire on theatre found within *Huckleberry Finn*.

an American identity for public consumption on a national and transatlantic scale.

Critics, drawing comparisons between *The Contrast* and more familiar plays such as Sheridan's *A School for Scandal* (1777) and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), frequently remark on similarities of plot, character, and construction between the American-based play with its British counterparts. On the surface, these similarities may seem to imply a lack of originality on Tyler's part, leading the casual observer to dismiss *The Contrast* as a pale shadow of Sheridan's work. However, elements within the play, such as the creation of the Stage Yankee (Jonathan, Manly) and the emphatic focus on "American" values over "European" decadence, combined with the post-revolutionary environments depicted in Tyler's play, establishes *The Contrast* as one worthy of closer examination.

Tyler's play seeks to adapt the best and most worthy social behaviors of England into American ideology without the ostentation and affectation of the very real aristocracy of Europe. Embedded within this comedy of manners, however, are the warring notions of British elitism and the newly developed ideals of American sentimentality. His use of books and novels within the play as a way of illustrating character and motive is an intriguing theatrical device that is subtle, yet effective. Additionally, it indicates the growing acceptance of the novel as a literary medium, with the implication that a "true" American strives to continuously improve him or herself through varied reading material. Cynthia Kierner[2] mentions a speech[3] printed in *The Columbian Magazine*[4]

[2] Cynthia Kierner, *The Contrast: Manners, Morals, and Authority in the Early American Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 101.
[3] Kierner notes in her book that "The Former, Present, and Future Prospects of America" was published as an essay in 1786. However, the original text, as printed in *The Columbian Magazine*, tributes this essay as the transcript of a speech given at the University of Philadelphia in 1784.
[4] *The Columbian Magazine* was a journal-style publication distributed around Philadelphia, PA, circa 1786.

(1786) that advocates: "American republicans could excel in the arts and sciences and that their works should be sources of both amusement and moral instruction." The significance of the speech lies in its support of reading for pleasure as well as for "moral instruction." More specifically, the transcript from *The Columbian Magazine* reads:

> Circumstances as we at present are in would be unpardonable, and it is impossible, but that we should daily increase and improve in arts, manufactures, and literature. ... But, for this purpose, other branches of literature, nay, all the arts and sciences, are to be advanced and cultivated—And, thus, by a wise intermixture of the *utile dulce*, we shall acquire a greater perfection in each part,—and unite pleasure and improvement in the same happy path. (Qtd. in Kierner 84-5)

Kierner asserts that the sentiments found in *The Columbian Magazine* were common among the intellectuals of the Early American Republic, and the drive to continue reading remained strong. Through an examination of the literary works assigned to the coupling of Maria and Billy Dimple in Tyler's play, it is possible to trace the favorable impact that the principles of sentimentalism had on the developing American identity.

However, Cathy Davidson indicates that just because America won its independence from England didn't mean an automatic cessation of all things British. Dimple's slavish adherence to the Chesterfieldian standard, Charlotte and Letitia's occupation with European fashion, and Maria's predominantly British reading material are all indicative of the continuance of a cultural cross-over between the new republic and Great Britain. In spite of the desire for independence and a national identity, attitudes toward women in general, and young women in particular, remained largely the same in either country. Davidson notes that even in

the new republic, a girl was still considered to be the property of her father. She adds:

> In sentimental fiction, too, the unmarried young woman was, for all practical purposes, the property of her father. The common *Clarissa* theme of the avaricious parents who essentially sell their daughter into an economically advantageous marriage was not just an extravagant borrowing from earlier British fiction but was an apt metaphor for the legal status of the postrevolutionary [sic] American girl. (118)

However, with the rise in popularity of the sentimental novel, an ideological shift toward the companionate marriage began to gain ground. In her essay titled "Knowing Love: The Epistemology of *Clarissa*," Katherine Binhammer states, "The affective revolution set off by the rise of companionate marriage, or marriage by choice, introduces the expectation of romantic love between husband and wife and places a new emphasis on women's consent to sexual relations in theory" (859). The idea of the companionate marriage within the play is one that causes Maria to reconsider her options regarding marriage, specifically turning her mind away from the arranged marriage to Dimple and toward the idea of contracting a love match instead. Dimple's own undesirable behavior in contrast to that of Colonel Manly's can be seen as representative of this shift as it coincides with the newly developed American ideologies of freedom and independence.

Tyler's contrast between sentiment and affected etiquette establishes a context for 18th century sentimentalism. Maria's initial acceptance of Dimple's proposal of marriage is based more on his general proximity and her own filial duty than on love and lasting affection. Letitia explains that "The old folks, about a year before Mr. Van Dumpling's death, proposed this match: the young folks [Maria and Billy] were

accordingly introduced, and told that they must love one another" (1.1.56-8). The instruction to "love one another" involves neither emotion nor the ability to reflect, since it is impossible to reflect on what isn't there. Letitia goes on to speculate that had Mr. Van Dumpling not died, which then led to Billy's Grand Tour and subsequent Anglophilia, Maria and Billy might have "jogged on, to the end of the chapter, a good kind of sing-song lack-a-daysaical [sic] life" (1.1.63-4), in a marriage of vague affection rather than love. Letitia's assessment highlights the 18th century paradigm shift in upper class marriages away from those conducted for financial and/or social gain, and thus exemplifies the newly popular ideas regarding the sentimental and the emergence of the companionate marriage.

The play opens with a scene between Charlotte Manly and her friend Letitia deep in conversation regarding fashion trends, social faux pas, and gossip centering on the impending nuptials of Maria to Billy Dimple. As Letitia informs Charlotte, "It is whispered, that if Maria gives her hand to Mr. Dimple, it will be without her heart" (I.i.47-8), thus sparking a discussion regarding Maria's change of heart toward Dimple as the direct result of her reading material. Letitia continues, saying that while Dimple was abroad, "Maria, like a good girl, to keep herself constant to her known true-love, avoided company, and betook herself, for her amusement, to her books, and her dear Billy's letters" (1.1.67-70), only to find that "Her love was destroyed by the very means she took to support it" (1.1.71-2) and that "as her taste [in books] improved, her love declined" owing to the contrast "betwixt the good sense of her books, and the flimsiness of her love-letters" (1.1.78-9). By allowing herself to be guided by her choice in reading material, Maria's adoption of sentimentalism is what leads to her eventual unfavorable comparison of Dimple to the heroes and heroines in her books. Conversely, although Dimple may have been a satisfactory beau for Maria prior to his tour of the Continent, his

exposure to and embrace of the decadence of European living made him an objectionable choice upon his return to America.

Tyler's use of popular eighteenth-century works to illustrate the contrast between the shallowness of Dimple's mannerisms and Maria's growing agency is of particular interest. In Dimple's absence, Maria (per Letitia's recounting) began reading works such as *Sir Charles Grandison* and *Clarissa Harlowe*, both by Samuel Richardson; the poetry of William Shenstone; and *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* by Laurence Sterne, all of which are works firmly rooted in sentimentalism. Through her novel reading, Maria is expanding her mental horizons and learning about the sentimental ideal—qualities that Dimple is concurrently and precisely eliminating from his own behavior through his rigorous application of Chesterfieldian mannerisms to social interactions. Maria is introduced as a "dear sentimentalist" and a "little piece of old-fashioned prudery" (1.1), implying that she is of a sober, intellectual nature that sets her apart from the more flirtatious and coquettish Charlotte and Letitia. However, regardless of Charlotte and Letitia's apparent disregard for sentimentalism, it is Maria who is established as the feminine standard of post-revolutionary literacy, and thus an example of the ideal *feminine* American identity. That Maria reads both for enjoyment and the improvement of her mind are the noble attributes that Tyler uses to echo the dictates toward reading mentioned in *The Colombian*.

Given that Maria's proposed marriage to Dimple had been arranged based on potential financial gain rather than affection, we can hardly fail to see the appeal that the independence fundamental to a companionate marriage would hold for her. *Clarissa* provides a model illustrating the supposed dangers of arranged marriages within its attempt to support the female prerogative to separate love from sex. Clarissa's adamant adherence to her own notion of virtue, regardless of her rape at the hands

of Lovelace, unjust treatment by her family, and subsequent death, corresponds with Dillon's idea of autonomous sentimentalism. Clarissa's thwarted quest for virtue combined with her strong desire for independence and autonomy is something that would certainly appeal to Maria's own sense of American patriotism. Furthermore, Maria's pursuit of her own freedom of marriage can be extrapolated to Tyler's own advocacy for the creation of a national identity separate from England.

In his book *A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf*, Kevin Hayes asks "in what contexts and for what reasons did early American women read," a question that bears significant relevance to this line of inquiry (101). He points out the relative certainty of the inclusion of seminal works by Mary Astell (*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*, 1694 – 97) and Eliza Haywood (*The Female Spectator*) in the colonial and post-revolutionary libraries, two works that a woman of Maria's social stature would have read, thereby furthering her ideas of "proper" female and male behavior (101).

Astell's writing, considered revolutionary in and of itself, challenges the perception of late 17th century British women by arguing: "For since GOD had given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of Thinking, why should we not ... employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs?" (Astell 52-3). Here, an ideology that was considered somewhat controversial in England, finds a more solid foothold in America, where the ideals of intellectual independence are presented alongside the burgeoning desire for a national identity as America sought to break away from Britain's hold politically, culturally, and ideologically. Thus, Astell's encouragement of female readership—although English—fully supports Maria's own intellectual pursuits through the

encouragement of female intellectual independence, while simultaneously lending itself to Charlotte and Letitia's opinion of Maria.

Hayes also turns his attention toward the introduction of the novel into American society. Most notably, he addresses a seeming ambiguity that the colonial female reader had toward fiction (101). In general, novels were read as the "guilty pleasure," with the assumption that novels contained little to no moral instruction, while books such as religious texts and other "instructional" material were considered appropriate sober reading material for proper young ladies. However, as epistolary novels, both *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* are presented in a manner that lends itself toward an assumption of veracity—fictional "letters" and correspondences presented as "found." Indeed, Hayes notes that Richardson's other work, *Pamela*, was exceedingly popular among colonial American literary circles. He acknowledges Richardson's own awareness of the ambiguous sentiment toward novels, and that "the reading public, both at home and in the colonies, might be reluctant to accept a fictional work," (102) and so published his novel with the title page reading *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*, thereby writing a novel under the guise of a book of conduct and etiquette. Additionally, Hayes makes the distinction that while the purpose of the novel was to entertain, the "delight-and-instruct paradigm helped to determine a hierarchy" (102) of reading material, regardless of whether the work was fiction or non-fiction. Those works that were presented as instructive were considered more appropriate reading material than the "horrid" novel—early works of Gothic fiction—that made their debut around the turn of the nineteenth century. These novels were purely sensational in nature, and did little "moral instructing," thus contributing to the controversial nature of the novel as a literary genre.

Linda Kerber expands on this blurring of fiction and non-fiction, specifically mentioning *Clarissa*, saying:

> It is no accident that the subtitle of *Clarissa* is *The History of a Young Lady*. The novel that purported to be "founded on fact" sought to straddle the ground between fiction and history. The novel that masqueraded as "true history" sought to claim the respectability of history and the appeal of romantic fiction: it could criticize fiction at the same time that it capitalized on the taste for romance. (248)

Furthermore, as fiction masquerading as fact, the epistemological format of Richardson's novels provides a kind of voyeurism: the reader is privy to the internal *private* thoughts by way of personal correspondence. Tyler is also able to comment on the growing popularity of the novel through its inclusion as a new medium on the stage. Associating Maria with the reading of novels lends itself to the implication that, although she is bookish and prone to "prudery," Maria is engaged in a fashionable activity that gains additional acceptance with Tyler's acknowledgement and tacit endorsement via its inclusion as a significant plot device within his play.

From a performative standpoint, by having Maria engage in the act of reading these novels on stage, an act of compound voyeurism takes place: Maria is "observing" the events of Clarissa and Grandison's lives as she, herself, is being observed, first by her friends and family, and then once again by the audience. The mannerisms and sentiment that she would have gleaned from her reading would have been readily apparent to the audience of *The Contrast*, as they would have also most likely been familiar with the works of Richardson, Shenstone, and Sterne. Furthermore, Tyler's use of these works in his play lends a kind of validity to the novel as a media format, where the sentimental examples idealized

femininity and masculinity set within their pages presents a persuasive argument to the audience in favor of Tyler's depicted American identity.

Tyler's choice of novels establishes a path for his audience to see how Maria's reading would conceivably generate an image of the sentimental ideal of both masculine and feminine behavior. Davidson adds, "Because of the high mortality rate during the Revolutionary War and the population explosion in its aftermath, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, a full two-thirds of the population of America was under the age of twenty-four" (112). Charlotte, Letitia, Maria, and Dimple can be assumed to have come of age shortly following the conclusion of the revolution in 1783, as evidenced by Dimple's Continental sojourn—an event that might not have been possible during the Revolution. Additionally, there is no evidence that Dimple participated (in any way) during the war itself, which suggests he was a young child at the time of the American Revolution. Conversely, we can assume that Manly is several years older, perhaps as much as a decade given his turn in the Continental Army and enlistment age of 16[5]. With such a large population of young people, significant portions of the plots of early American novels were focused on the things critical to the young adult reader of post-revolutionary America. Davidson comments saying, "In sentimental fiction, particularly, far more emphasis is placed on a young woman deciding whom to marry than on an older wife determining how to raise her family" (113), thereby appealing to the younger demographic within the upper classes who presumably had more leisure time to read novels than the older generation.

Hayes concludes his chapter regarding "Facts and Fictions" in the early American library stating, "While both novels and travel books

---

[5] Todd Andrlik, "Ages of Revolution: How Old Were They on July 4, 1776?" *Journal of the American Revolution*, August 8, 2013, https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/ages-of-revolution-how-old-1776/

attracted readers for their tales of romantic adventure, the two kinds of works share another characteristic. The women novelists, their heroines, and the female travel writers provided colonial women with intellectual role models" (122). These women sought their own kind of independence through the companionate marriage and through their own acts of escaping the private (domestic) sphere—however briefly—that traditionally limited the role of women in eighteenth century society—British or American. Furthermore, Davidson suggests that the surplus of young women (compared to young men who possibly fought and died in the war) in post-revolutionary America were gaining in literacy, more so than previous generations (112), and thus novels such as *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* were falling on the fertile minds of the young making them ideal specimens to advocate for the new American identity in Tyler's play.

Both of Richardson's novels present Maria with opposing sentimental images of eighteenth century masculinity, along with models of early feminine agency, a fact that she embraces:

> Maria: Who is it that considers the helpless situation of our sex, that does not see we each moment stand in need of a protector, and that a brave one too. … Ten thousand temptations allure us, ten thousand passions betray us; yet the smallest deviation from the path of rectitude is followed by the contempt and insult of man, and the more remorseless pity of women: years of penitence and tears cannot wash away the stain, nor a life of virtue obliterate its remembrance. Reputation is the life of woman; yet courage to protect it is masculine and disgusting; and the only safe asylum a woman of delicacy can find is in the arms of a man of honour. (1.2.25-42)

By establishing Maria's sense of duty and honor, Tyler sets her up as the standard of female virtue parallel to Manly's own attributes. Maria is also painfully aware of the precarious nature of female virtue—a point that a novel such as *Clarissa* would have made abundantly clear. Although Clarissa never willingly submits to Lovelace and is subjected to a brutal rape, her intrinsic value has been debased, and therefore, innocent or not, her only recourse is death. Thus Maria, through her own awareness of her situation, makes the effort to emulate Clarissa's goodness, while holding up the virtues illustrated in *Sir Charles Grandison* as her romantic ideal.

Like *Clarissa*, Richardson's third novel *Sir Charles Grandison* paints an equally sentimental picture for Maria to consume. While *Clarissa* presents Maria with an image of the sentimental *feminine* ideal, *Sir Charles Grandison* is specifically representative of the sentimental *masculine* ideal. Whether *Sir Charles Grandison*, the title character of which is frequently viewed as the male equivalent of Clarissa[6], was success or failure by critical standards is irrelevant; the novel stands as an example of masculine sentimentality in relation to Maria's interpretation within *The Contrast*. By presenting both *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison* as epistolary novels, Richardson invites his audience to effectively experience "first hand" the trials and tribulations of his characters, thus emphasizing the empathic emotionality that typifies the sentimental novel. In other words, the sheer *sentimentality* of *Clarissa* is a seductive thing; the reader (in this case, Maria) is encouraged to respond both intellectually and somatically to the novel. It provides the pleasure of voyeurism combined with instructional commentary on how people *should* behave within polite society, thus enabling Maria to begin questioning Dimple's desirability as a potential husband against her own developing identity as an independent American woman.

[6] See also Pamela, the title character of Richardson's first novel.

Dimple, unlike Maria, has eschewed the sentimental novel in favor of reading Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman* (1746 – 1771). This collection of letters significantly influences Dimple's behavior, transforming him into "a flippant, pallid, polite beau, who devotes the morning to his toilet" and then "minces out, to put the infamous principles in practice upon every woman he meets" after reading "a few pages of Chesterfield's letters" (1.1.94-7). Letitia also acknowledges Dimple's change for the worse, citing Richardson's examples of masculinity in comparison to Dimple's character claiming "he had by travelling acquired the wickedness of Lovelace without his wit, and the politeness of Sir Charles Grandison without his generosity" (1.1.90-2). Although Dimple in all his foppish glory is arguably the more interesting character, his artificial, and more significantly, *foreign* contrivances thrusts the image of the Yankee into an identity separate from, and more desirable than, the one that Dimple represents: "Dimple is the traditional fop, the artificiality of whose Chesterfieldian speech and manners is severely condemned. He is not, of course, an Englishman but that more dangerous type, the Europeanized American ..." (Stein 464), thus Dimple comes to embody the British identity that Maria (and Tyler) seek to reject. The comparison that Tyler is drawing between Maria's reading habits and those of Billy Dimple is clear; the sincere sentimentalism found within the pages of the new "modern" British novels is worth emulation by the "true" American, while the insincere, affected, and above all *antiquated* etiquette of British "elite" are adopted only by the sycophantic Anglophile. This disparity between behavioral instructions within the works of Richardson and Chesterfield is what establishes the contrast that gives the play its title, and begins to separate the developing American Identity with that of England.

In opposition to the romantic sentiment of Richardson's novels, *Chesterfield's Letters* offers the kind of effete and pretentious advice that would have been an anathema to the emergent American masculine identity. Indeed, Tyler's play significantly echoes the ideologies put forth by Thomas Paine is his 1776 treatise, *Common Sense*. It is not insignificant that Tyler chose to name his hero Manly; Paine repeatedly mentions "unmanly" behavior, which he urges all Americans to avoid, going so far as to say to those who still bow to the tyranny of England: "you have the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant" (Paine). Ann Dean speculates that the continued popularity of Chesterfield's letters is based on its premise of self-improvement. More specifically, "Chesterfield describes a method for controlling others through submitting to the unspoken conventions of the group" (692), actions that would have held vast appeal for one with such lofty, and above all *English*, aspirations of social climbing as Dimple.

In his letter dated October 16, 1747, Lord Chesterfield writes on the "Art of Pleasing," saying:

> The art of pleasing is a very necessary one to possess; but a very difficult one to acquire. It can hardly be reduced to rules; and your own good sense and observation will teach you more of it than I can. 'Do as you would be done by,' is the surest method that I know of pleasing. Observe carefully what pleases you in others. If you are pleased with the complaisance and attention of others to your humours, your tastes, or your weaknesses, depend upon it, the same complaisance and attention on your part, to theirs, will equally please them. (Chesterfield *Letter XVII*)

It is this specific letter that Tyler includes in his play, most likely because of its wording that seems to encourage the kind of sycophantic behavior that Paine and the founding fathers held in contempt. Chesterfield advocates

pandering to egos, stating, "If you would particularly gain the affection and friendship of particular people, whether men or women, endeavor to find out the predominant excellency, if they have one, and their prevailing weakness, which everybody has; and do justice to the one, and something more than justice to the other" (*XVII*). This advice is predicated on the knowledge that each man "is sure of one excellency, and distrustful of the other," and so by applying excessive flattery (regardless of sincerity) to another's "weakness," the flatterer gains the ability to "turn [the other's] head" to a more favorable opinion (*XVII*). Where Dimple is the antithesis of eighteenth century American masculinity, the ideal is realized in the embodiment of Colonel Manly. As the representative of the Jeffersonian example of "natural" nobility within the play, Manly functions as the standard of virtue, and the pinnacle of sentimental heroism. His name says it all: he embodies the "true" American identity, and to be otherwise would cast aspersions on one's own masculinity.

Tyler's particular inclusion of the Chesterfield Letters in his play offers, by way of contrast to the sentimental writings of Richardson and Shenstone, the supposed difference between American and British masculine behavior; while *Sir Charles Grandison* establishes a template for the a "manly" ideal, the Chesterfieldian advice does the opposite by encouraging "unmanly" sycophantic behavior. Tyler's audience is invited to judge for themselves: Act 3 opens with Dimple at his toilette reading aloud and commenting on the usefulness of Chesterfield's advice. He is joined by his servant Jessamy, who reports the arrival of Manly and Jonathan. Upon learning from Jessamy that Manly holds the position of colonel, he states:

> Dimple: I ought, according to every rule of Chesterfield, to wait on him and insinuate myself into his good graces. –Jessamy, wait on the colonel with my compliments, and if he is disengaged I will do

> myself the honour of paying him my respects. —Some ignorant, unpolished boor— ... I'll accost him there, in my way to Letitia's, as by accident; pretend to be struck by his person and address, and endeavour to steal into his confidence. (3.1.68-9)

Dimple slavishly panders to the conventions and mannerisms set by the pre-revolutionary British elite, and willingly tries to ingratiate himself into Manly's good graces in an attempt to curry favor with Charlotte, although he thinks Manly to be well beneath him. This kind of attempt at social manipulation illustrates the behavior that Paine called the "spirit of a sycophant" and unworthy of the "true" American.

Superficially, *Chesterfield's Letters* bears some resemblance to Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. All are collections of letters that in some way concern the deportment, etiquette, and social conduct of young adults in the late eighteenth century. As fiction, Richardson's novels suggest the sentimental ideal, while the Chesterfield Letters contain actual advice from a father to his son. All three seek to lead by example; Tyler's usage, then, reflects on the difference in how these examples of conduct are executed. Maria, influenced by the sentiment of her novels, exhibits the *noble* attributes of virtue, while Dimple foolishly misses the point of Chesterfield's letters, that is to *conform* to the *group*, and so presents himself as a rather pretentious fish out of water to a humorous effect.

Furthermore, the epistolary nature of the reading material provides a kind of ambiguity regarding the veracity of the information, thus echoing the early American uncertainty regarding the value of reading novels. Like Maria, Dimple's own literary habits have voyeuristic overtones. He is the silent witness to the exchange between Chesterfield and his son, while his affections of foreign mannerisms are observed simultaneously by both the other characters in the play and by the audience. However, the habits and

norms that would have been acceptable in British high society are grossly inappropriate in the post-revolutionary American setting, and thus those that are voyeuristically observing Dimple in action cannot fail to see the contrast between American and European values.

The care with which Tyler selected the novels portrayed within his play indicates that *The Contrast* is not simply an imitation of Sheridan or Goldsmith's work. Rather it is a play that precisely endeavors to set the new republic apart from the shadow of the British Empire, while simultaneously helping to create a national identity for the American tacitly through the act of reading sentimental novels. Given the popularity of both Richardson's novels and Chesterfield's letters, Tyler was undoubtedly familiar with the contrast between Richardson's "sincere" sentimentalism and Chesterfield's ingratiating council, thus their inclusion in *The Contrast* advocates for a pro-American, and therefore anti-British, response to develop in his audience. Tyler's staged acts of reading within *The Contrast*, are consequently highly effective tools in his arsenal to depict the social contrast between the Americans and the British, and establish a national identity for the new republic.

WORKS CITED

Andrlik, Todd. "Ages of Revolution: How Old Were They on July 4, 1776?" *Journal of the American Revolution*, August 8, 2013, https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/ages-of-revolution-how-old-1776/

Astell, Mary. *A Serious proposal to the ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest: in two parts*. London. 1697. *Open Library*. Internet Archive. Web. 25 Apr. 2012.

Bannet, Eve Tavor. "The Constantias of the 1790s: Tales of Constancy and Republican Daughters." *Early American Literature* 49.2 (2014): 435 – 466. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Barr, Rebecca Anne. "Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* and the Symptoms of Subjectivity." *The Eighteenth Century* 51.4 (2010): 391-411. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Binhammer, Katherine. "Knowing Love: The Epistemology of *Clarissa*." *ELH* 74.4 (2007): 859-879. *Project Muse*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Boswell, James. *The Life of Samuel Johnson L.L. D*. 1791. London, 1830. *Google Book Search*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Broude, Ronald. "Performance and the Socialized Text." *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation* 6.2 (2011): 23 – 47. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Conlon, James. “Men Reading Women Reading: Interpreting Images of Women Readers.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 26.2 (2005): 37 – 58. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 May 2015.

Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

Dean, Ann C. “Authorship, Print, and Public in Chesterfield’s Letters to His Son.”*SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. 45.3 (2005): 691 – 706. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 April 2015.

Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. “Sentimental Aesthetics.” *American Literature* 76.3 (2004): 495-523. *Project Muse*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Domingo, Darryl P. “Unbending the Mind: or, Commercialized Leisure and the Rhetoric of Eighteenth-Century Diversion.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45.2 (2012): 207 – 236. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Dorson, Richard M. “The Yankee on the Stage-A Folk Hero of American Drama.” *The New England Quarterly*. 13.3 (1940): 467 – 493. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 May 2015.

“The Former, Present, and Future Prospects of America.” *The Columbian Magazine*. 1787. 83 – 86. *Open Library*. Internet Archive. 15 Apr. 2010. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.

Gordon, Scott Paul. “Disinterested Selves: *Clarissa and the Tactics of Sentiment*.” *ELH* 64.2 (1997): 473-502. *Project Muse*. Web. 15 May 2015.

Griffith, Karlyn. “Peformative Reading and Receiving a Performance of the *Jour du Jugement* in MS Besançon 579.” *Comparative Drama* 45.2 (2011): 99 – 126. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Hayes, Edmund M. “Mercy Otis Warren versus Lord Chesterfield 1779.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40.4 (1983): 616 – 621. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Hayes, Kevin J. *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. Print.

Heyd, Uriel. “News Craze: Public Sphere and the Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Depiction of Newspaper Culture.” *The Eighteenth Century* 56.1 (2015): 59 – 84. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Kierner, Cynthia A. *The Contrast: Manners, Morals, and Authority in the Early American Republic*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. Print.

Michals, Teresa. “‘Like a Spoiled Actress off the Stage’” Anti-Theatricality, Nature, and the Novel.” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 191 – 214. *Project Muse*. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

Marshall, Madeleine Forell. “Late Eighteenth-Century Public Reading, with Particular Attention to Sheridan’s *Strictures on Reading the Church Service (1789)*.” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 36 (2007): 35 – 54. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Moody, Richard. *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre 1750 – 1900*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955. Print.

Morse, David. *The Age of Virtue.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. Print.

Nathans, Heather S. *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.

Richards, Jeffery H. *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.

---. "The Adventures of Emmera, the Transatlantic Novel, and the Fiction of America." *Early American Literature* 42.3 (2007) 495 – 527. *Project Muse*. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

Roach, Joseph. "The Emergence of the American Actor." *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*. Vol. 1. Ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 338 – 372. Print.

Schaffer, Jason. *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Print.

Siebert, Donald T (Jr.). "Royall Tyler's 'Bold Example': *The Contrast* and the English Comedy of Manners." *Early American Literature* 13.1 (1978): 3 – 11. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 May 2015.

Stanhope, Phillip. “Letter XVII.” *Chesterfield's Letters to His Son*. The Project Gutenberg. 14 February 2007. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Stein, Roger B. “Pulled out of the Bay: American Fiction in the Eighteenth Century.” *Studies in American Fiction* 2.1 (1974): 13 – 36. *Project Muse*. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.

---. “Royall Tyler and the Question of Our Speech.” *The New England Quarterly* 38.4 (1965): 454-474. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 May 2015.

Taylor, David Francis. “‘The Fate of Empires’: The American War, Political Parody, and Sheridan’s Comedies.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42.3 (2009): 379 – 395. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Apr. 2015.

Thompson, Helen. “Secondary Qualities and Masculine Form in *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*.” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24.2 (2011–12): 195-22g. *JSTOR*. Web 15 May 2015.

Tyler, Royall. *The Contrast*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. Print

---. *Royall Tyler Correspondence 1787 – 1810*. The Royall Tyler Archive. Vermont Historical Society, Barre.

Vaccaro, Kristianne Kalata. “‘Recollection ... sets my busy imagination to work’: Transatlantic Self-Narration, Performance, and Reception in *The Female American*.” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 20.2 (2007-8): 127 – 150. *Project Muse*. Web. 27 Apr. 2015.