The Male Stage
College Theatricals and Masculinity in the Age of the American Revolution

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In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the colonial colleges turned out to be a driving force in the development of drama in British America, where theater was largely considered sinful and, at times, banned by the law.[1] Surprisingly, however, the vast majority of printed histories of American theater has paid little—if any—attention to college drama, often dedicating but a paragraph or a footnote to student theatricals. This essay is designed to revisit

1 Antitheatrical prejudice was brought to the American colonies by the first settlers. For English Puritans the theater stood for chaos and anarchism and was against the laws of God. The stage was considered the church of Satan, since it allegedly subverted the idea of true Christianity. The Puritans who immigrated to America brought these severe prejudices with them (Houchin 6). Antitheatrical legislation, however, differed from colony to colony. The General Court of Massachusetts, for instance, passed the so-called "Act to Prevent Stage-Plays and other Theatrical Entertainment" in March 1750. This document stated that "[f]or preventing and avoiding the many and great mischiefs which arise from public stage-plays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which not only occasion great and unnecessary expenses, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase immorality, impiety, and a contempt of religion. […] [If] any person or persons shall be present, as an actor or spectator of any stage-play, interlude, or theatrical entertainment in any house, room, or place where a greater number of persons than twenty shall be assembled together, every such person shall forfeit and pay […] five pounds" (qtd. in Johnson and Burling 135-36). This law remained in effect until 1793 (Johnson and Burling 136). On August 30, 1762, Rhode Island passed "An Act to Prevent Stage Plays and other Theatrical Entertainments within this Colony," copying the preamble of the Massachusetts law word by word and using a similar diction throughout the document (Seilhamer 127-28). People involved in or attending theatrical productions in the latter half of the eighteenth century were thus not only attacked "merely" for moral reasons, they were in fact driven into illegality.

and renegotiate the significance of college drama in a time of radical political change, an era characterized by the American colonies' struggle to gain independence, the Revolutionary War, and the process of building a new nation based on a distinct cultural and political ideology.

The dialogues written and performed by students as part of the annual festive commencement ceremonies at the College of Philadelphia, Harvard, and Yale in the latter half of the eighteenth century were distinctly theatrical in nature. The subject matters of the pieces became more complex and sophisticated as the eighteenth century drew to a close, and the commencement ceremonies were of particular significance not only for the students and college members involved but also for the population of the college towns.

The five dialogues discussed in this essay were performed between 1776 and 1797 at the three abovementioned colleges, and they are representative of dramatic endeavors at academies in the age of the American Revolution and the establishment of the new Republic. All pieces were, of course, written and performed exclusively by men, and therefore reading and discussing these texts is worthwhile not only in terms of their dramatic and theatrical elements, but also because they show to what extent the notion of "manliness" was negotiated in a time when masculinity was far from being a stable concept.

Among the commenters who have acknowledged the significance of college drama is Odai Johnson, who, in his 2008 essay "Drama in the Academies of Early America," stresses the fact that colleges were, "for pedagogical purposes, [...] exempt from antitheatrical legislation" (177). The pedagogical purpose was training in oratory, and dramatic performances were most often disguised as didactic dialogues or forensic disputes during commencement ceremonies. A printed *Account of the Commencement in the College of Philadelphia* in May 1775 provides an overview of how the day-long ceremony was structured. The festive act started with a "Part of the Church service, and an occasional prayer, by the Provost." This service was succeeded by an "Anthem, accompanied with the organ and other instrumental music" and a "Latin Salutatory Oration." Several speeches by single students as well as a "Latin Syllogistic Dispute" involving three speakers followed before the degrees of Bachelors and Masters of Arts were officially awarded to the young men who had finished their studies. Next came the dramatic dialogue, a "Valedictory Oration," and a "Charge to the Graduates, by the Prov[ost]." The day came to an end with a "Concluding Prayer" (*Account* 1-2). This outline shows that the entire commencement ceremony was of a theatrical nature: framed by a church service

and a prayer, the program is characterized throughout by performances on a stage before a full audience who gave "great and generous applause [...] to the different speakers and to their exercises" (*Account* 2). To be sure, this theatrical dimension becomes most evident in the performances of dramatic dialogues.

These dialogues were typically composed by students or alumni of the respective college (and, as in the case of Philadelphia, sometimes by the college president himself). In the foreword of a printing of two dialogues performed in Yale in 1776, the anonymous authors state that they are only in their third year of their college studies, and they express their hope "that the Critic will not be so unkind as to censure their Defects with his utmost Severity" (*Two Dialogues* 3). In his volume *American Drama*, Gary A. Richardson argues that the quality of commencement dialogues was "uniformly poor" (5); he admits, however, that

> [d]espite their formulaic and subdramatic natures, the collegiate exercises and dialogues served an essential function in the development of the fledgling American drama. They provided American students with opportunities to see and participate in dramatic productions and thereby not only encouraged would-be dramatists and prospective audiences by providing an aesthetic training ground, but also gave intellectual credibility and social acceptability to dramatic endeavors. (5)

Whether the dramatic quality of the dialogues was in fact "uniformly poor" lies, of course, in the eye of the beholder. Formulaic some of these exercises may have been (in particular those presented at the College of Philadelphia in the 1760s, since most of them focused on a solemn celebration of Great Britain using the same pattern year after year rather than developing a specific plot); why Richardson claims they were "subdramatic," however, is not fully comprehensible, for most of these dialogues were *decidedly* dramatic, as they were written to achieve an emotional effect on the audience. They were also clearly theatrical, for they were written expressly to be performed before an audience. These pieces were usually written for two to three speakers, all of whom had to slip into a specific role.

College of Philadelphia: A Surprising Sense of Humor

Most of the dramatic dialogues performed during commencement exercises that are available today were written and performed at the College of Philadel-

phia (today's University of Pennsylvania). In 1755, William Smith (1727-1803) became the first provost of this school, which had been founded six years earlier. He held his office until 1779 and again from 1789 to 1791 ("William Smith" n.pag.). Smith was a proponent of the theater and introduced spoken commencement exercises in English, since he felt that proper pronunciation of the English language was no less important than knowing Latin and Greek (see Barone 114-15). Under Smith's supervision, numerous dialogues were written and performed during commencement ceremonies at the College of Philadelphia. It is obvious that Smith's focus was on oratory training rather than on the contents of the dialogues: throughout the 1760s, the subject-matter of these pieces hardly saw a change, for they were all written in order to celebrate Great Britain and the king. The language used is remarkably turgid, even for eighteenth-century standards. All dialogues are written in verse, predominantly in rhyming couplets. Of the 1770s and '80s, hardly any commencement dialogues have survived.

The dialogue composed for the 1790 public commencement represents a stark contrast to all available earlier performances at the College of Philadelphia; it stands out due to its surprisingly humorous elements, and it includes stage directions. Whereas the text culminates once again in impassionate rapture (this time praising the values of science, music, peace, and religion), the first part is characterized by a remarkably self-ironic attitude. The characters no longer bear names that evoke the picture of figures of Greek mythology or ancient writings; they are simply called M. and C. The character called C. expresses a great nervousness when speaking "before so many ladies," and he explains his rhetorical insufficiency:

> My fears and bashfulness so much prevail
> Before the *ladies*—constantly I fail.
> Of my best speeches I forget one half,
> And, quite confounded, like an awkward calf,
> Around me raise an universal laugh. (Smith 3, original emphasis)

C.'s remarks emphasize how exceptional it was to see women in the usually all-male environment of a college. Commencement ceremonies were generally open to everyone, regardless of their gender or race.[2] The speaker, the dia-

2 Samuel Eliot Morison quotes a poem by an unidentified author that circulated in the eighteenth century, entitled "Satyrical Description of Commencement." This poem was written about commencement ceremonies at Harvard and reads as follows: "All Sizes

logue humorously implies, is intimidated by such diversity, which disrupts the male homosociality the students are accustomed to, and he makes fun of traditional, self-assured notions of masculinity. After expressing his irritation, C. attempts to quit the scene but is—as the stage direction reveals—caught by M., who tells him to stay and continue speaking. M. compares C. to "some coy maiden on her wedding night" (4), thus contributing to the mockery C. already made of his own manliness. Apparently not the least disturbed by this unflattering comparison, C. finds his voice again and declares during a longer monologue:

> But, ladies! not to tire you longer, say—
> What shall we call th' amusement of the day?
> Is it a COMEDY? a FARCE?—Oh, no!
> For the whole world, we must not call it so.
> 'Tis a COMMENCEMENT—that I think's the name,
> Or general JAIL-DELIVERY—much the same—
> Or if they will excuse an odd conceit,
> About this tedious *scientific treat*,
> It may be liken'd, in my poor opinion,
> Exactly to the *peeling* of an ONION—
> Skin after skin, and knowledge after knowledge,
> All smelling rank of LEARNING and the COLLEGE—
> If you *peel on*, in hopes a core to find—
> Alas! there's little more than skin and rind. (5, original emphasis)

Such a display of self-mockery is extraordinary, for humor was certainly not among the typical ingredients of commencement acts. Quite the contrary, these ceremonies were hallmarked by seriousness, solemnity, and festiveness. All other available commencement exercises of the time—no matter at which college they were performed—have in common that they hardly show any sign of humor. What makes this dialogue even more outstanding is the fact that the humor is directed against the festive occasion itself, most likely a novelty

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and each Sex, the Ways do throng, / Both black and white ride Jib-by-jole along! / […] The Nut-brown Country Nymphs and rural Swains / […] Appear there on this celebrated Day: / Thus till near Night they flock; and in a Word, / The Town's a Cage fill'd with each kind of Bird!" (qtd. in Morison 121). Morison notes that the poem is said to have been printed in 1718 but that, judging from the language used, he doubts it was written before 1760 (121).

in 1790. Perhaps even more than ever before, the theatrical aspect was taking center stage, since this text with its inclusion of elements of comedy was clearly designed to make the audience laugh. This dialogue is more than a training in oratory, and it transcends the usual aim of lecturing the spectators. This work, with its tongue-in-cheek depiction of "unmanly manliness," is of an amusing quality, and it can thus be seen as a clear concession to the theater as a means of entertainment.

Harvard: Discussing Slavery

Dramatic writings presented during public commencements at Harvard in the eighteenth century are hard to find. Whether most of these texts were never printed or lost in the course of time is nigh impossible to verify today. Numerous announcements of and short comments on commencement acts in local newspapers of the time stand testament to the fact that dramatic dialogues did play a significant role in these ceremonies. In a 2017 article in *The Harvard Crimson*, Jeffrey W. Andrade and Matt B. Hoisch point out that in eighteenth-century Harvard,

> debates were common at graduations, a way to prove that years of schooling and study were not wasted or squandered. It was more about performance than politics: For much of the college's history until [the latter half of the eighteenth century], the debates had been in Latin and inaccessible to many. But […] the format shifted, debaters began to speak in English, and suddenly their words became meaningful to the larger public. (n.pag.)

Among the few surviving texts is a debate written and performed in 1773, noteworthy for its highly controversial topic. Entitled *A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans*, the text composed by Harvard students Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson raises the question as to whether or not slavery can be defended on ethical grounds. This work is one of the few debates for which the entire transcript is still available (see Andrade and Hoisch n.pag.). Contrary to most other commencement dialogues, this piece has received critical attention, not for its being a student theatrical, but for the controversial nature of its content. At first glance, it may appear arguable whether such a "debate" can be classified as dramatic, for what is expressed throughout the disputation most likely represents the speakers' personal points of view; thus, they did not have to assume or enact specific roles. Larry E. Tise argues that

"[f]ar from being an abstract exchange of ideas between college chums, the evidence suggests that the debate was a public airing of an ongoing private feud" (30). Still, the text was carefully drafted and clearly composed to achieve a dramatic effect on the audience. As such, public debates can be considered theatrical, since the rhetoric used on such an occasion more than likely differed considerably from the language applied in a private dispute sans audience.

In *A Forensic Dispute*, Theodore Parsons speaks out in favor of slavery, whereas Eliphalet Pearson takes an anti-slavery stand. Parsons' arguments can, by today's standards, only be described as highly unsettling. He justifies white domination over Africans by comparing it to "the natural authority of parents over their children" (13). He goes on to insist that slaves in America are way better off than Africans on their native continent, in which the living conditions are "so much more miserable" (29). The "removal" of Africans from their native countries is thus, he suggests, "to be esteemed a favor" (27). Parson's passionate defense of slavery culminates in the following statement:

> But who I beseech you, ever thought the consent of a child, an ideot [sic], or a madman necessary to his subordination? Every whit as immaterial is the consent of these miserable *Africans*, whose real character seems to be a compound of the three last mentioned. What can avail his consent, who through ignorance of the means necessary to promote his happiness, is rendered altogether incapable of choosing for himself? […] [I]t is undoubtedly the duty of those, whom providence has favored with the means of improvement and understanding, and the wisdom resulting from such improvement to make use of their discretion in directing the conduct of those who want it. (28, original emphasis)

Such claims, Tise suggests, "represented the quintessence, the very heart of American proslavery thought whether colonial or antebellum" (32). Bernard Rosenthal, on the other hand, argues that Parsons' "unimaginative case" most probably did not meet with the spectators' approval and that "the audience was stacked in his [opponent's] favor" (76).[3] The opponent, Eliphalet Pearson, brings forward the argument that there is no natural inequality between whites and Africans:

3 It would be interesting to know where Rosenthal has obtained this information. Unfortunately, he does not state any sources.

> I suppose you will hardly imagine the darkness of a man's skin incapacitates him for the direction of his conduct, and authorizes his neighbours, who may have the good fortune of a complexion a shade or two lighter, to exercise authority over him. And if the important difference does not lay here, it seems not very easy to determine where it does; unless perchance, it be in the quality of their hair; and if the principle of subordination lies here, I would advise every person, whose hair is inclined to deviate from a right line, to be upon guard. (21-22)

Pearson's anti-slavery arguments have been controversially discussed. Nancy V. Morrow claims that Pearson "misses his mark," and that the reference to physical features "seems particularly inappropriate since his adversary has not tried to raise any direct evidence of negro inferiority, couching any such implications in the abstract and rather benign parental analogy" (243). Morrow's remarks (written in the mid-1980s) are disturbing, and Pearson does not miss his mark, even if Parsons has not mentioned physical features to describe the assumed inferiority of Africans. Pearson introduces the topic of physicality in order to take the wind out of Parsons' sails. Moreover, Pearson *is* responsive to Parsons' comparison of white dominance over Africans to parent-child-relations: the example of a parent's "tender concern for the welfare of his offspring," he argues, is "far from being applicable to the point in hand" (20). That Morrow sees in Parsons' comparison no more than a "rather benign parental analogy" is particularly disconcerting: Morrow's statement represents a clear case of downplaying a clearly racist remark, and it makes the pro-slavery speaker's outrageous attempt to justify white supremacy appear harmless. Morrow, it must be stressed, is not alone in her criticism against the anti-slavery advocate: Tise goes as far as to call Pearson a "miserable failure," accusing him of not upholding the natural rights theory refuted by Parsons (379). Tise's comment does not stand the test of a thorough reading of the debate, since Pearson states that "such is the constitution of things with regard to man, such his nature, state, and condition, as renders it absolutely impossible that a principle, warranting the exercise of authority in any particular case […] should be correspondent to this end" (18). Pearson's remark leaves no doubt that in his point of view no one has the right to dominate others, hence he *does* express his belief in the same "natural rights" of all human beings.

Eliphalet Pearson's anti-slavery endorsement has also met with approval, to be sure. Rosenthal notes that Pearson "made such an impressive case, that apparently on the strength of his remarks, the debate was published" (76). He

goes on to praise Pearson's "devastating logic" and notes that the speaker's attack on his pro-slavery opponent "combine[s] moral indignation, penetrating psychological insight, and no small amount of wit" (76). Rosenthal appreciates what Morrow and Tise refuse to see, namely Pearson's decisive superiority, not only in terms of morals but also as far as the validity and credibility of his arguments are concerned.[4]

Despite its serious theme, *A Forensic Dispute* also offers entertainment. Pearson's comments are, at times, sarcastic ("I would advise every person, whose hair is inclined to deviate from a right line, to be upon guard" [22]) and ridicule the idea of racial superiority. Parsons reacts to Pearson's dry-humored comments by answering that he is "no enemy to humour," but that his opponent should have "saved […] this needless expence of wit" (22). Parsons is not in the mood for humorous remarks, for his fierce defense of controlling and suppressing Africans seems to be not least based on a fear for his own masculinity. Exercising white (male) power over Africans, which he compares to "the *absolute* authority of the Governor of the universe over the creation, and […] of parents over their children" (13, original emphasis), means holding the upper hand not only as a white person but also, and specifically, as a white *man*. By arguing that the "natural inhabitant of *Africa* [is] necessarily destitute of every mean of improvement in social virtue" (25, original emphasis) he expresses his fear of the alleged raw, uncivilized power of the black man that could threaten his own manliness. Hence, for Parsons, slavery indicates not only the superiority of the white over the black race but also, and particularly, the superiority of white over black masculinity. Pearson, on the contrary, represents the enlightened white man who does not harbor the primeval fear so inherent in his opponent.

4 More than two hundred years after its composition and presentation, *A Forensic Dispute* still arouses debate and thus sets itself apart from other commencement writings. The dialogue has only recently been reenacted by Harvard students in a short film called *No More, America*, which premiered at the Harvard Arts Museum on October 19, 2017. The film adds the "voice" of Phillis Wheatley, a then-enslaved poet who was—like Parsons and Pearson—twenty-one years old in 1773 ("*No More*" n.pag.). This project proves that *A Forensic Dispute* has lost nothing of its explosive nature.

Yale: Generational Conflict, Patriot Propaganda, and the Moral Question of Suicide

Issues of masculinity took center stage at Yale, too. Students at Yale were no less active in composing and presenting dialogues than their Harvard peers. In 1776, *Two Dialogues, On Different Subjects*, written by two unidentified students in their third year, were presented to the audience at the commencement act. What is exceptional about the first text, simply called "A Dialogue," is the fact that it has an actual plot containing what can be considered a surprising twist. The dialogue features two speakers bearing the telling names Blithe and Hunks, apparently middle-aged men who have an argument concerning their grown-up children. The two young playwrights/actors must have put themselves in the place of men some thirty years older than they were. Blithe's son wants to marry Hunks' daughter, so Blithe—on behalf of his son—asks Hunks for his approval. Hunks, however, responds that he dislikes Blithe's son and that he has already found another match for his daughter (7). Hunks wants his daughter to marry his cousin's son, solely because this young man is "Heir to a great Estate," owning a "Patrimony lying between two excellent Farms of [Hunks'], which are at least worth Two Thousand Pounds" (9). Real estate and money are the only qualities about his cousin's son that Hunks finds worth mentioning, and he readily admits that he intends to force his daughter into this marriage (10). The punishment for Hunks' greediness follows swiftly in the piece's twist: Blithe informs Hunks that the chosen bridegroom is already married and hands the baffled man a letter which confirms that the wedding has just taken place. What is more, it turns out that Hunks trusted his own brother with the process of passing on the deeds confirming ownership of the two farms to his daughter as soon as she would get married to the groom-elect (9). Hunks is then informed by Blithe that the deeds have only recently been given to his son, since Hunks' brother already knew that the cousin's son was married. "Yes," Blithe tells Hunks, "your Brother thought that my Son had an undoubted Title to them now, since his Cousin was married, and so he gave him up the next Day" (11). Hunks is furious and decides to abandon his daughter, who he thinks has been involved in the plan and wanted to escape the arranged marriage. Expelling his daughter is obviously not difficult for him, as his only true concern is the loss of his farms: his outcry "O! my Farms! what shall I do for my Farms!" (12) concludes the dialogue.

The moral of the story is as simple as it is obvious: greed will be punished. Yet, the dialogue has more to offer than scathing criticism against material-

ism and arranged marriage: it offers a heated discussion over generational differences. Hunks describes Blithe's son as "extremely wild and profuse" (5) and accuses him of leading a luxurious, extravagant life. Blithe defends his son, stating that "he appears genteel and fashionable among People, but he's in good Business, and lives above-board, and that's sufficient for any Man" (7). In his reply, Hunks leaves no doubt that he finds fashionable men suspicious, and he further attacks Blithe's son:

> 'Tis fashionable, I suppose, to powder and curl at the Barber's an Hour or two, before he visits his Mistress—to pay Six Pence or Eight Pence for brushing his Boots—to drink a Glass of Wine at every Tavern—to dine upon Fowls drest in the richest Manner:—And he must dirty two or three ruffled Shirts in the Journey. This is your genteel, fashionable way, is it? (8)

Hunks' sentiment echoes the idea of the "new man" at the time of the colonies' struggle to gain independence from Great Britain. An alternative concept to the flamboyant British gentleman, the "new man" represented the virtues of the new Republic and was characterized as "bold, rugged, aggressive, unafraid of fighting, and comfortable asserting himself" (Bronski 29). It is more than likely that the composers of the dialogue were patriots and believed in the idea of an independent America (especially since the second dialogue celebrates America and denounces Great Britain), but nonetheless wanted to show that masculinity was not necessarily characterized by coarseness and ruggedness, even though these character traits were considered the new American ideal. The character who defends young people and their behaviors and lifestyles triumphs over his ever-complaining opponent, who is clearly portrayed as a killjoy and a sore loser. As such, the performance of the dialogue before a full audience must have been a rather daring act, for Hunks' contempt for the way many young men lead their lives was in all probability shared by more than only a few spectators. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that the two students who composed the short play created the easy-going Blithe as their ideal of the elderly gentleman whose calmness and understanding of youth they wished could be found in more representatives of the older generation. Thus, the authors cleverly made use of a fictional character—a seemingly respectable man of a certain age—to defend their own lifestyles.

The second work in *Two Dialogues* is entitled "Dialogue, on the Success of our Arms, and the Rising Glory of AMERICA" and was written by the same two unidentified students. Performed one year after the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, it supports the colonies' ambition to become independent.

This support of the patriot cause comes as no surprise, since Yale was—like Harvard—among the "most active 'nurseries of republicanism'" (Tucker 17). In a fashion typical of patriot propaganda writings in those days, the dialogue slams Great Britain and praises America's war heroes. Composed in verse to underline the solemnity of what is being expressed, this work features two characters: Count Massilon, "a French Gentleman," and Narvon, "an American" (13). Massilon starts by praising America as a "happy land, where true religion dwells," to which he fled from his home country, France, "that barb'rous land" (15) characterized by "*tyranny*" exercised by "a Despot on the Gallic throne" (17, original emphasis). Massilon's remarks foreshadow the French Revolution starting thirteen years later; however, the situation in France is not discussed in further detail, and Massilon—throughout the dialogue—has little more to do than dropping cues for Narvon's scathing criticism of Britain and his impassionate praise for America. "But, pray inform me who the villains are, / That have been plotting to enslave your land?" (16) the Frenchman asks Narvon, who responds, "'Tis BRITAIN'S KING, leads on the bloody van, / Succeeded by a group of *venal slaves*, / All buried deep in *luxury*, and dead / To *honour*, dead to *reason, justice, faith*" (16, original emphasis). The cruelty of the British king is juxtaposed with the amiableness of George Washington:

> GREAT WASHINGTON, unequal'd in the fame
> Of prudence, wisdom, and superior worth;
> Heroic virtue, manly fortitude;
> Majestic mien, and graceful dignity.
> Yet never has the greatness of his soul
> Beam'd forth more radiant lustre, brighter shin'd,
> Than when appointed to the first command. (21)

Such worship of one of the quintessential heroes of the American pursuit of independence doubtlessly appealed to the vast majority of a New England audience. The dialogue bluntly depicts "strong" masculinity as an American virtue: Washington with his "manly fortitude" triumphs over the villainous British monarch. Moreover, the emphasis put on piety throughout the text and particularly at the end—the last words of the dialogue read "And earth united; shouts, 'MESSIAH REIGNS'" (31)—must have met with the approval of a society so deeply ingrained in religion. It almost seems as if the two young authors composed this expression of solemn patriotism as a kind of

compensation, a reward for the audience who had endured the first dialogue with its relatively daring message.

In 1797, one of the commencement exercises performed at Yale was entitled *The Suicide*. It was composed by student Thomas Day, then twenty years of age. Though called a "dialogue," this piece of work, however short, is clearly a proper stage play. It starts with a list of "Dramatis Personae" (4), a term not used before in college dialogues, and it is divided into three scenes, with changes of settings. Written and performed more than a decade after the victory of the former colonies over Britain in the War of Independence, this dialogue no longer deals with questions of the superiority of America over the "Old World." Instead, the play, written in free verse, raises the question whether committing suicide is an offense against the then oft-cited "laws of God." In the first scene, Abraham Bellamy talks to his friend Orvill about the problems he faces in his relationship with his son, Alphonso Bellamy. Abraham laments the disobedience of his son, who "with vile hand has squander'd / [Abraham's] hard-earned property upon his lusts" (5). It is time, Abraham states, to let his son "feel the folly of his conduct" (5). Orvill, reminiscent of Blithe in the 1776 dialogue, takes Alphonso's side:

> Your son is flighty, gay and thoughtless; warm
> In his affections, desperate in his courage;
> His heart is open, generous and sincere;
> But young, and unexperienced in the world,
> The falsly glittering charms of vice have caught
> His heedless soul, and like a wandering fire,
> Have drawn him from the straighter path of duty.
> For this, he claims your pity more than your
> Displeasure. (5)

Like the authors of the dialogue more than two decades earlier, Day defends men of his generation through the words of a fictional mature man. The message is clear: no one is completely evil, even if they make seemingly wrong decisions, and everyone deserves a second chance. Moreover, Orvill's remarks illustrate that young men stray from the right path not by choice but because they are vulnerable and fall prey to temptations. Orvill, similar to Blithe in the earlier piece, functions as a mouthpiece for young males who do not fit the description of the "new man." Putting these words of defense into a mature and undoubtedly respectable man's mouth most likely had a stronger impact on the audience than presenting a juvenile character speaking for himself would

have had. The play has a clear message: a father should understand that his male offspring is not necessarily cut from the same cloth as he is. Accordingly, Orvill recommends to Abraham that he let his son know he can forgive him, predicting that Alphonso's "soul will melt with gratitude, and call / Him, for his father's sake, to practice virtue" (6). Thereupon, Abraham softens his tone and promises to receive his son, once he realizes his own errors, with open arms. Orvill's defense of Alphonso's conduct in life did not fail to have the desired effect. The core of Orvill's message is that love and forgiveness can get a person back on the straight and narrow.

The second scene introduces Alphonso, who is just about to commit suicide. In a monologue he gives somewhat cryptic reasons for his decision to take his own life: he hates the world, he declares, because he has sold his reputation, and what remains of him "is bestial,—fit, and only fit / To perish from the sight of human eyes" (8). Orvill enters the room and succeeds in preventing the young man from shooting himself at the very last minute. Only now does Alphonso describe in more concrete terms what drove him to attempt suicide. He reveals that he started going astray when

> […] growing years
> Called me to enter a Collegiate life.
> Here a new aera, in my morals, opened.
> Lured on to vicious pleasures, by example,
> And their own novel relish, soon my conscience
> Asunder broke all moral ties.—A sense
> Of honor then alone restrained my hand
> And heart, from all that folly could devise,
> Or madness execute.—By nature formed
> With passions strong and ardent, was it strange
> The snaky charm of gaming should engross
> My unexperienced soul? (9)

Alphonso admits that he succumbed to the temptation of gambling. Rather than confessing to his own "guilt" of not resisting the lure of games of hazard, however, he blames the college environment for introducing him to the dangers of temptation. Such sentiment comes as a surprise, given that the play was performed during a commencement ceremony at Yale. However, the blame put on the college is somewhat mitigated by Alphonso's confession that his "nature," too, played a role in the development of his addiction.

Having lost his father's money and affection takes a heavy toll on Alphonso, who sees no sense in carrying on living "Banished from home, from all / The soft endearments of domestic life, / And doomed to hopeless poverty and shame" (10). It is thus questionable whether Alphonso genuinely regrets losing his father's money by gambling. His concerns appear to be somewhat more selfish: the prospects of being poor, forsaken by his family, and disrespected by society seem to be more discomforting to him than the thought of having gambled away his father's fortune. As such, the dialogue can be read as a critique of the notion that parents are no longer responsible for their offspring once they have entered college. What the play suggests is that parents have no "moral" right to send away their sons to college and afterwards blame their descendants for not living a virtuous life. Parents, the text suggests, should not act as if they were no longer responsible for the actions of their children once they sent them away to pursue their studies. After all, Alphonso claims that it is his "nature"—and thus, what was given to him by his antecedents—that made him take the wrong way. Young men, the dialogue tells its audience, are not the only ones to be held liable for their actions once they have been consigned to their own fate. It is particularly noteworthy that the dramatic piece explicitly points out that Alphonso's moral detour coincided with taking up his studies, since the dialogue was performed as part of a festive commencement act at one of the new nation's most respected colleges. Parents, the text implies, should not think that their offspring is safe at college, however strict the seminary may be led by the authorities. Day thus leaves no doubt that he thinks there can always be a certain "guilt" assigned to parents when their sons lose their way. *The Suicide*—similar to the 1776 Yale dialogue—attempts to defend the lifestyle of young men, however wrong it may appear at first glance.

Notwithstanding the message Alphonso tries to get across, the discussion between him, who still claims the right to kill himself ("Have not I / A right to quit this world, whene'er I please?" he asks [10]), and Orvill continues. "Shall not He who gave / Our lives," asks Orvill, "recall them in what manner best / Shall please Him?" (12), thus emphasizing the religious notion of suicide as an abominable sin. Orvill, now shifting from defending to criticizing Alphonso, points out that suicide is an act of "cowardice" and a form of high treason against God (13). Alphonso wittily counters Orvill's remarks and touches upon a controversial issue, arguing that if God alone has the right to end a life,

> The members of a nation have no right
> To grant their legislators power to take
> Their lives away, for capital offences.
> Hence every death, on criminals inflicted,
> Is so much barbarous tyranny and murder. (13)

Alphonso's criticism of capital punishment comes as a surprise, since it leaves no doubt that, at least when it comes to capital punishment, he believes that God's law stands above civil law. As such, his remarks can be read as a critique of the United States' legislation. Orvill dismisses Alphonso's objection by claiming that those sentenced to death lose their lives to "God alone," not to the members of a nation (14). "In every instance," Orvill continues, "Suicide is guilt" (14). However, Orvill's lengthy deliberations on the religious stance on suicide do not impress Alphonso, who replies that he cannot "wait / With patience nature's call" (14). It is only after Orvill notes that Abraham is willing to forgive him ("Thy father gladly would extend his arms, / And press thee to his heart, were he but sure / Thou wouldst reform" [16]) that Alphonso finally decides to stay alive (17). Alphonso's change of mind is by no means a concession to religion, it is solely based on the assurance that his father is inclined to condone his misconduct.

The short third and last scene begins with Abraham reading a letter in which Alphonso announces his suicide. Abraham thus deems his son dead and blames himself:

> Oh! hapless son! Oh! cruel, cruel father!
> Yes, *Orvill* told me true.—It is my own
> Unfeeling conduct, that hath caused, to him
> This dreadful death, these racking pangs to me.
> Wretch that I am! How could rebellious nature
> Permit me to reject my only son!
> How could my mischief-making head contrive
> The infernal plan! How could my flinty heart
> Consent to execute it! Oh, my son!
> My murdered son! (18, original emphasis)

Abraham's confession of guilt on his part illustrates the play's message: abandoning people who made mistakes can drive them to commit suicide. Generosity and the willingness to forgive, on the contrary, can save their lives and guide them back to the right way again. The play's message is at first glance

simple and trivial; still, the play is noteworthy for leveling criticism against the religiously motivated notion that suicide is, first and foremost, an offense against morality. Trying to persuade someone not to kill themselves on the ground of religion alone, the play demonstrates, is not sufficient.

Abraham's self-accusation is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Orvill and Alphonso. For a moment, Abraham thinks he is confronted with a "shade of [his] departed son, / Sent while the blood is smoaking [sic] from his body" (19), but Orvill assures him that Alphonso is alive. Father and son are reunited and both confess their mistakes (20). This "happy ending" has been made possible through Abraham's insight and forgiveness, not through Orvill's moralizing attempts to make Alphonso feel guilty.

Conclusion: The Significance of Commencement Theatricals

The college commencement exercises in the latter half of the eighteenth century were not only significant to the participating students, but also to the population of the college towns and their surroundings. In a time of antitheatrical prejudice, these festive acts were highly popular, even though amusement was not their official purpose. The performance of dramatic dialogues, however, supplied entertainment, and the commencement acts in their entirety had all the ingredients of theatrical events: a stage, performers, and an audience. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, visiting from Poland in 1798, paints a glowing picture of what these ceremonies meant to the locals. On the day of Harvard's public commencement in July 1798, he noted in his diary that

> the bridge was crowded with more people than on any single day of the whole year. Whoever had carriage, buggy or horse or could find one for hire, rode in to the famous *Commencement*. […] Beside the hackney carriages of the prim and sedate there were others full of negroes, negresses and little black imps. Everyone free, everyone dressed in a similar fashion. There were hackney carriages and cabriolets full of gay young ladies with gentlemen escorts, other young ladies strolled by on foot with their escorts. (qtd. in Budka 512, original emphasis)

Although he describes life in eighteenth-century Massachusetts in disturbingly romanticized terms, Niemcewicz's account shows that college commencements were a welcome change for the townspeople in the 1700s. The commencement performances were, as Johnson points out, "a continual

tradition" which "served to keep the idea of theater alive in the cultural imagination during the long absence of professional playing companies" (176). Thus, visits to commencement ceremonies to a certain degree substituted for the nearly impossible attendance of theater productions, and it is more than likely that many a dialogue prompted heated debates among the spectators.

Moreover, the dramatic dialogues and short plays performed at American colleges in the last quarter of the eighteenth century give evidence of multi-faceted notions of masculinity. While one of the protagonists of the Philadelphia dialogue shows a great deal of self-irony as he ridicules his own masculinity and evidently does not mind being mocked by his partner on the stage, the speaker in favor of slavery in Harvard's *Forensic Dispute* appears to be worried about his standing as a white man in power, should the purportedly "savage" black men be freed. One of the pieces presented at Yale contrasts British masculinity, exemplified by the British king and presented as deplorable, with American masculinity, which is praised as heroic and superior. Quite contrary to this display of unconditional praise, the other two plays performed at the same college ask for empathy with young men who meet considerable opposition because of their conduct in life. By depicting such an array of male figures, the dramatic works acted out as parts of the commencement ceremonies bear testimony to the ongoing negotiation of the idea of masculinity in America as the eighteenth century was drawing to a close.

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