Theatrical Depictions of Women and Marriage in America, 1750-1820

History 495 Independent Study
Northern Illinois University

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May 12, 2013
Prologue

Patriots fought in the American Revolution to gain liberty and equality. As a result, a select and powerful few reluctantly surrendered agency to the many. The many, however, did not include the whole. After the Revolution, a great proportion of the whole were not left with the full right to the free exercise of action and will, especially in the public realm. While the American Revolution gave men a public voice in the affairs of their own government, women did not achieve similar results. After the Revolution, women did not have political representation, with the notable exception of some who lived in New Jersey, and that singular privilege was rescinded in less than ten years. Whether or not women achieved greater independence during the Revolutionary era is not measurable in documented political liberties. Changes in agency for women are more easily detected in the private realm, though more difficult to measure than changes tracked in pounds and pence or laws written and enacted in public spaces. Early American women made choices regarding children, grandparents, seemingly superfluous maiden aunts, and household provisions. These decisions were no less significant than the public decisions that men made about tolls, taxes, tariffs, property lines, or rental fees. Familial decisions hid behind a curtain of household privacy and were not recorded for future reference or legal convenience. One such familial decision was the intimate negotiation about marriage. This paper seeks to gauge changes in female agency before, during and after the Revolution through the examination of changing theatrical depictions of how brides choose their grooms.

During the Revolutionary era, marriage marked a highly ritualized joining of forces between men and women. The rituals surrounding marriage reflected unspoken and abstract undertones within early American culture and revealed attitudes concerning female agency. By
examining changes in courtship and weddings before, during, and after the American Revolution it is possible to trace specific cultural changes that reflected independence of action in the lives of women. Theater historian, David Grimstead describes some cultural insights as “intellectual assumptions so profound that they seem less ideas than the inevitable way of looking at things.” Grimstead calls these kinds of ideas, “so translucent, that there seemed no ideas at all.” He contends that the theater is an apt vehicle for inspecting these seemingly wispy truths, for the stage is a public place where private affairs of the heart were rendered for all to see.

The question of how bridal choice changed during the Revolutionary era relates to three important trends, and the results of this study contributes to ongoing debates about them. The first trend is the history of the Revolution itself. For the purposes of this paper, our examination of it will be limited to two historians who have contributed important arguments, Gary Nash and Gordon Wood. In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Wood stresses that the American Revolution brought to life the enlightenment ideals that ushered in the separation from the political structures of the old world. Wood argues that the Revolution was radical and successful. Gary Nash does not debunk the idea that the American Revolution was radical, but argues with Wood’s idea that ideals were the primary cornerstone of the Revolution. In *The Unknown American Revolution*, Nash contends that dissatisfaction on the part of non-elite colonists with their economic lot in life was the main impetus behind the push for liberty from Britain. To him, radicalism shaped the course of the Revolution, but ultimately its promise remained unfulfilled. These are not utterly different points of view, because both authors contend that the American Revolution brought about a seismic change in the world that began an

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entirely new way of governing, but they are still distinctive as to the motivation behind that change. This is important to note when considering the role of women in the American Revolution.³

Historians of women in the Revolution have made it clear that women played an important part, but they disagree on the lasting consequences. Mary Beth Norton contends that women were significantly involved in the Revolution and that their role changed what was possible for them. Norton believes that the upheaval of the war allowed women a meaningful, if limited place, in public life. According to her, the American Revolution ultimately raised the bar on the importance of the feminine role in society and that legacy played an important role in the future development of women’s rights.⁴ Linda Kerber, on the other hand, believes that although the Revolution provided women with a temporary place in the public sphere during the war, they returned to their almost exclusively private role thereafter. Kerber argues that women had attempted and in a limited way succeeded to find a place in public life by politicizing their role in the private sphere by ennobling the hearth and home in the new Republic. The role of motherhood and marriage became weighted with patriotic duty. This shift in perception allowed women to remain in the role of helpmate. Ultimately this role allowed women to be a part of the independence movement, but also to continue on conservatively, in a deferential relationship to men.⁵ These two views of tremendous change during the war and the long-term consequences continue to shape the historiography on women in the American Revolution.


Historians have also addressed marriage during this period. During the Revolutionary era, matrimony was of primary importance in the lives of women. According to Stephanie Coontz, marriage provided the main source of social protection to women, and without it they were cast adrift into adulthood. For the purposes of this paper, the spacious topic of marriage is narrowed to the consideration of a woman’s entry into marriage and the level of agency she exercised in her choice of a husband. Coontz believes that marriage changed more during the eighteenth century than at any time before or since. She contends that the system of marital partner choice started to change significantly in Western Europe in the seventeenth century due to the fact that couples married later and were closer in age than in previous times. In addition, she argues that after marriage couples moved out on their own and away from their families of origin. She contends further that because of the Enlightenment and a burgeoning market economy, couples began to choose their partners rather than fall into arranged marriages. Rosemary O’Day also emphasizes the central importance of being a wife in the lives of early American women, but she argues that marital choice was not something that women were able to exercise to any great degree. She states, “Few if any marriages were based upon romantic love. Fathers throughout society believed that they owned their daughters and could dispose of them as they wished.”

These two very different points of view will be explored in this paper and the primary source materials, plays presented in America in the Revolutionary era will enlighten and enliven the discussion.

Finally, this study will contribute to the historiography of early American theater. David Grimstead was a pioneer in the practice of using drama as a vehicle for studying culture. In his

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7 Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History* (New York: Viking, 2005), 7, 145, and
book, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture 1800-1850*, Grimstead argues that drama opens up a door to understanding social history because the theater was open to all classes of people and it depended upon their opinion to remain viable. Heather Nathan agrees that drama is a good reflection of society and can reveal a great deal about a culture’s norms, but that theater in the Revolutionary era was not democratic in nature. She contends that the stage in early America was an elite institution because the majority of theaters were run by wealthy white males. Even though the audiences were often from the lower classes, the theaters were built by white men and the actors and authors were hired by them. She discounts the level of audience control upon what was seen on the stage. This conversation about the role of audiences and performers is important to the question of whether drama is a proper vehicle to use to explore the idea of bridal choice. I believe that there is evidence for the persuasive strength of audience opinion in the Revolutionary era and that opinion is bolstered by the historical evidence put forth by Richard Butsch. His *The Making of American Audiences from Stage to Television 1750-1990*, is a broad survey of American audiences with a tight focus on their active or passive participation in the productions that they view. He argues that Revolutionary era audiences were an active group and that they interacted with what was shown on stage to such and extent that the actors actually amended their lines for them. Butsch contends that this kind of interplay made the theater scene in America evolve rapidly. This examination of evidence in theatrical productions leads toward the ideals and practices of the populations as a whole.8

The examination of female choice in marriage as portrayed on the stage in the Revolutionary era adds a significant voice to the historical conversation about the American Revolution and the changes that it brought about. The question of bridal choice is one that has not been examined to a great extent. Rosemary O’Day states, “Marriage negotiation was a delicate and secret affair.”9 The task of examining female marital choice during the American Revolutionary era is one that requires evidence that is not always easily found. It is not difficult to determine whom a woman might marry; there are court records for that. It is also simple to determine how many women married and how long they stayed married, but it is not easy to find out how she came to the most important decision: determining whom the groom might be. Plays are an apt instrument for measuring the bride’s role in the delicate and secret affair of marriage negotiation.

Dramas published and presented in the Revolutionary era provide a rich collection of cultural portraits. It is important to note that theater did not render a completely realistic picture of women as they were, but rather portrayed them as a stylized version of a feminine type. Theatrical portrayals reveal popular cultural ideas about identity in much the same way that movies and television do in our era. Movies like *Mildred Pierce*, *Thelma and Louise* and *Legally Blonde* have portrayed many of the choices and outcomes that women of our current era have experienced, and have thus shed light upon agency. This paper will explore how theatrical depictions of bridal choices changed from 1750 to 1820, in order to assess the impact of the Revolution on the private side of feminine power.

With few exceptions, the plays examined for this project are from the Evans and Shaw-Shoemaker series of Early American Imprints. The Evans and Shaw-Shoemaker papers are

exhaustive collections of all materials published in America between 1639 and 1819. The American Antiquarian Society publish the works drawn from Charles Evans’ and Ralph R. Shaw’s and Richard H. Shoemaker’s extensive bibliographies. The collection contains 371 plays and 194 of them have courtship and marriage as the central aspect of their plot structure. This indicates the significance of marriage in drama during the Revolutionary era. The first play was published in America in 1714 and the second in 1762. Between 1762 and 1810, 370 plays were published. This concentration of publication within a relatively short time span indicates that drama quickly became an important art form in America right before the Revolutionary era. Drama, therefore represents a significant collection of evidence which can shed light on the question of women’s agency.

Courtship and marriage played into almost all of the types of drama performed on the American stage between 1750 and 1820, such as melodrama, comedy, satire, drama, and tragedy. The dramatic narrative of young love and courtship was of great interest to audiences during the years leading up to the American Revolution and there is an abundance of dramatic material showing the choices that brides made.

With one important exception, all the plays examined were performed before an audience by a professional troupe of actors, as indicated by Odai Johnson or William J. Burling in their extensive documentary calendar of the Colonial American Stage and William Dunlap in his history of American Theater. Most of the plays with the one exception as noted above, were also popular with early American audiences in either Boston, Philadelphia or New York. Finally,
each play has a featured bride whose dialogue or action clearly indicates her agency or lack thereof in the context of marriage.\textsuperscript{10}

The plays featured in this project show significant changes in agency among the brides depicted. The change was clear not only in her communication of the marriage choice but also in her position as a member of the dynamic bridal party consisting of herself, her groom and her guardian. This shift in agency was not complete. The bride was not transformed into a fully independent being due to the changes wrought in the American Revolution, but the plays reveal a clear change in the position of the bride. The plays reveal the bride’s altered idea of herself, her place and her power.

\textit{Act I}

\textit{1750-1766}

The American Revolution did not just spring out of the minds of well read gentlemen who had steeped themselves in the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment. The Revolution was a product of different varieties of people who lived in the colonies, including wealthy intellectuals, middle class shop keepers and tradesmen, Native Americans, people struggling to keep themselves clothed and fed, slaves, and finally, the often forgotten, fifty percent, women.

Most of these individuals sought more self-determination, and as a result of their collective efforts many of them achieved it in varying degrees.\textsuperscript{11}

In the midst of political and economic interests that pushed the colonists toward independence, a great deal of social change occurred as well. The private, as well as the public, domain was changing in the colonies and both realms were a part of the recipe that brought about the Revolution. In many ways, the private sphere of family life was influenced by developments in the public sphere. Private life concerned itself with different decisions, but they were no less weighty. Though domestic resolutions may have had more individual repercussions, they were tremendously significant in the broader sphere. This included the private, household choices of colonial women.

For a colonial woman, her wedding was a public ritual that began a new private life. When looked at in this light, the marriage decision is one that had a great impact upon society in the colonies. Almost every adult woman was married in the colonies and her marriage choice was perhaps the single most important factor in her life. Marriage was a crucial decision which determined a woman’s future as almost no other aspect of life could do.\textsuperscript{12}

The fact that the colonies were in a new land that had been settled by people from an old one influenced the mores and customs of courtship and marriage in early America. Richard Godbeer argues that the sexual practices of the colonists brought about a societal fear that the people would lose their civility from the old world and become “savages.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus there were strong societal efforts to encourage marriage among white colonists. Monogamy, and female

\textsuperscript{11} Nash, \textit{The Unknown American Revolution}, xv.
\textsuperscript{13} Richard Godbeer, \textit{Sexual Revolution in Early America} (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 2002).
purity, if not consistently practiced were at least held up as a common ideal. According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, nearly all colonial women married, whereas in Europe up to ten percent of the female population remained single. The question of marriage and marriage choices was of utmost importance to the colonists. In colonial marriage, women were held to a legal mandate to obey their husbands. Fischer found through his studies of sexual mores in the colonies that adultery was considered to be “a sin of the deepest dye.” Mary Beth Norton argues that marriage determined a woman’s future and laid the ground work for, “a life of happiness, or misery. In addition, marriage was a tool to maintain civilized society. The choice of marriage partner for a bride was a choice of great consequence, for she was not only choosing a partner for life, she was also entering a nearly mandatory rite of passage that upheld colonial society and kept it from devolving into barbarism.”

Knowing the importance of marriage and the significance of marital choices for women of the colonies, one wonders how they came to their determinations. The social system of private decision making was established by broad practices that were in flux in the colonies. Norton proposes that colonial marriage was often a collective decision. Colonial society established two specific safeguards to protect the bride from making a disastrous choice: rules in the form of behavioral barriers and the protection of a guardian who helped negotiate the marriage decision. These rules and the guardian role were present in plays of the colonial period, especially in Restoration comedies. These popular theatrical pieces almost always featured multiple romantic plots and subplots, which frequently culminated in a wedding. Drama

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14 Ulrich Good Wives, 6.
15 Fischer, Albion’s Seed, 88.
16 Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters The Revolutionary Experience, 51.
17 Norton, Liberty’s Daughters, 58.
presented in the late colonial era shed a broad-light on the question of colonial marriage and what it meant for brides in important ways.\textsuperscript{18}

The first plays performed in America were amateur productions performed in barns, inns, and homes. There were a few professional players who were a part of disorganized touring companies that might be thought of as street carnival performers rather than theatrical troupes. The first professional troupe was the The Murray Keane Company, which arrived in America in 1750. They were followed in 1752, by a professional group that had extensive experience in London called the Hallam Company. The Hallam performed until the Continental Congress banned theatrical performances in 1775. Its members spent the Revolutionary War years in Jamaica and returned to America well after 1787. The professional troupes in America during these late colonial years were almost exclusively British, with British plays, performers, producers and traditions. The audiences, however, were American, and they influenced what happened on their stages. What was popular continued to run, and what was unpopular did not. David Grimstead notes that this dynamic between audience and producers allows the stage to act as a vehicle to “glimpse at the popular mind of an age.”\textsuperscript{19}

The plays that will be examined shed light on the collective colonial mindset regarding matrimonial choices were either published or performed in the Colonies between 1750 and 1765 and they feature at least one bride on the stage. I am interested in three questions regarding these plays, Do the brides have a say in their marriage choice? How are they communicating their preference? Finally, are they the instigators of the choice? The answers to these simple


questions help to shape the primary evidence for a glimpse at the mind of the age in so far as bridal choice was concerned.

American audiences preferred established plays that were popular in England at the time. Because of the small numbers of actors that came to the colonies, the performers brought the works that they knew, the standard English repertoire. The plays that continued to be performed, however, were chosen by their audience and played repeatedly. Colonial Americans liked British plays because they brought the refinement of England to their cities. There was a distinctly Puritan influence upon American tastes which were more conservative than English preferences. The more ribald Restoration comedies did not play well in the colonies; those that fared the best had a clear moral message. The plays which had long established runs represented virtue and conservative morality.²⁰

Three Restoration comedies which highlight the role of the bride had great popularity in the colonies. They were *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux Stratagem* by George Farquhar, *The Provoked Husband* by J. Vavbrugh. All of these plays had love, courtship and marriage as a common central plot device. Although they were written by English playwrights and performed by English troupes trained on the British stage, they were also enjoyed by colonial audiences and paid for with colonial coin.²¹

These plays resonated with the theater-going public in the colonies, and according to Miller and Dunlap, they were among the most popular plays performed in the colonies before 1765. In fact, *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Provoked Husband* remained popular for many

²⁰ Miller, *Entertaining the Nation*, 5.
years after the American Revolution. Their presentations of brides are a significant representation of a cultural ideal in late colonial America.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{The Orphan} by Thomas Otway

One of the earliest recorded colonial performances of Thomas Otway’s \textit{The Orphan} was an amateur production presented in the barn of a Boston back yard in 1765. It is about the consequences that arise out of secret marriages that are not arranged by authority figures or accepted by conventional society. It is a tragedy in every way, the heroine has a shameful demise and the young heroic brothers die tragically, one of sorrow, the other of shame. There is nothing good that comes out of the play’s depiction of a youthful and aborted attempt at marital bliss. It is clear that this play is making the point that marriage choices are best left in the hands of wise and benign parents and guardians, and not left to rash young lovers. An audience member of another amateur performance sums up the play’s central characteristic in his letter to the editors of the June 15-22, 1769 issue of the \textit{New York Chronicle}, “I say, gentlemen and ladies!- a tragedy called The Orphan or An Unhappy Marriage; from which the known abilities of the tragedians, wou’d have been most tragically tragidis’d…” This redundant but apt description summarized the overall intention of the play- to tragically tragedise.\textsuperscript{23}

The play features a retired nobleman Acosto, who has decided to keep his sons Castalio and Polydore occupied with studies at home with him rather than sending them to war. He is also the guardian of a young, lovely girl, Monomia. Casalio and Polydore both love Monomia and

\textsuperscript{22} Miller, 5, and Dunlop, \textit{History of the American Theater}, 5.
vie for her affections in return. Castalio asks Monomia to marry him in secret and she agrees, Polydore finds out what occurred and on the wedding night replaces the groom. The result of the deception is catastrophic, the brothers die and Monomia is blamed.

*The Orphan* provides an excellent instrument for examining the choices of the young bride to be, Monomia. In the first act, Monomia hears about Castalio and Poldore’s rivalry for her affections and though flattered, she is also appalled at the thought that the men speak of her as a possession to be gained. She cries, “Am I then grown so cheap, just to be made a common stake, a prize for love in jest?”

“Though in truth, Monomia is a prize, the rivals who seek to win her, must also gain her consent.

“I’d rather run a savage in the woods,  
Amongst brute beasts, grow wrinkled and deform’d,  
So I might still enjoy my honour safe,  
From the destroying wiles of faithless men.”

In this passage it can be seen that the bride clearly has the choice of refusal. Monomia has her honor to protect, as can be noted in her words to Castalio. Monomia has made the choice to refuse Castalio’s advances rather than lose her chastity, but when Castalio (off stage) asks for her to wed, she changes her mind and relents. Monomia decides to follow her preference and passion and Castalio’s will. The bride, Monomia communicates her preference vehemently and she states, “I will, I must, so hardly my misfortune loads me:--That both have offer'd me their love's most true.”

Monomia does not instigate her choice of marriage, that is left to Castalio, but it is in her hands to decide yeah or nay. She confesses that her soul is Castalios’s now, but in the final line,

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26 Otway, 16.
she spins the question of ownership that she lamented in Act I and speaks of the mutual
ownership that marriage implies.

“Still will you cross the line of my discourse.
Yes, I confess that he hath won my soul
By gen'rous love and honourable vows,
Which he this day appointed to complete,
And make himself by holy marriage mine”.  

But that is not where the marriage of Castilio and Monomia ends. They wed in secret and by
their own volition. Their marriage was made outside of family hierarchy and the results are
tragic. Monomia’s brother prophecies Castilio and Monomia’s doom.

“I cannot guess, though 'tis my sister's honour,
I do not like this marriage,
Huddled i'the dark, and done at too much venture;
The business looks with an unlucky face.
Keep still the secret: for it ne'er shall 'scape me,
Not e'en to them, the new-match'd pair. Farewel!
Believe the truth, and know me for thy friend”.

This foreshadowing statement is placed in stark contrast to a more conventional and legitimate
marital arrangement for Castilio’s sister, given by her father Acosto, to his chosen suiter,
Chamont.

“Chamont, pursue her, conquer, and possess her,
And, as my son, a third of all my fortune
Shall be thy lot.
Chamont, you told me of some doubts that press'd you:
Are you yet satisfy'd that I'm your friend”.

Acosto is telling Chamont, his chosen suitor to take action and to win the bride. She is his to
take because she is Acosto’s gift to give. It is clear that though the bride has the ostensible right

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27 Otway, 17.
28 Otway, 24.
29 Otway, 22.
to veto a decision; her choices are rewarded greatly if they run in tandem with her guardian’s decision.

The Orphan contrasts the tragedy of marriages made outside the boundaries of family hierarchy with the rewards of marriages made within those bounds. If attention is to be paid to the popularity of the play, the colonies embraced this central message. According to Odai Johnson and William J. Burling, *The Orphan* was the ninth most popular play in standard repertoires in the colonies. Its first professional colonial season was performed by a London Theater manager named Henry Holt and his dance students in The Court Room Theater in Charleston in 1735. *The Orphan* continued to be performed twenty-seven known times in New York, Philadelphia and Boston, until its last colonial performance by the Hallam Douglas American Company in Charleston at the Church Street Theater in 1774.  

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31 Miller, *Entertaining the Nation*, 5.
“The Recruiting Officer”

This play, written in 1732 by George Farquhar, resonated with audiences from its first production at Drury Lane in London in 1706 until 1963, when it was performed by Sir Lawrence Olivier and Dame Maggie Smith. It is the first play that was ever produced on the New York stage, and it continued to be performed there throughout the 18th century. It featured a great deal of action that concerned weddings, courtships and the personal agency of brides. Further, it highlighted the thoughts and experiences of an independent young woman who is ultimately tamed by the world at large into a suitable marriage. *The Recruiting Officer* displayed the choices that a young bride might make or might not be able to make before she entered matrimony.

The play features two young women, Sylvia and Melinda, who are caught in a love quadrangle that is worthy of a Shakespeare comedy. Sylvia and her lover, recruiting officer Captain Plume are a steady pair. Melinda, however, has strayed from her worthy love because she has come into property through the inheritance of £20,000. With the independence that her fortune has given her, she has let her heart stray toward another recruiting officer, aptly named, Captain Brazen. Through many plot twists that include a waylaid letter, a fortune teller, and young Sylvia, dressed as an officer in disguise, Melinda finds that the independence that her fortune gives her does not mean that her personal judgment was correct. Finally, she gives up her independence and returns to her first love and joins him in marriage. In these plot permutations, the bride, Melinda has shown a clear ability to name her preferences, but she does not instigate her choices. In fact she finds that her new won agency is misleading and she is led by circumstance to amend her choice. In this play, the bride’s agency is checked.
There is a telling scene in the play in which the other bride, Sylvia, expresses her desire for the affections of Captain Plume. Melinda, her companion, responds by realistically assessing Sylvia’s powerlessness in comparison to such a man by stating,

“Thou poor romantic quixotic! Hast thou the vanity to imagine that a young spritely officer that rambles over half the globe in half a year can confine his thoughts to a little daughter of a country justice in an obscure part of the world?”

Melinda summarizes the basic male to female power dynamic explicitly here: Men owned the world, women didn’t. Men had the newfound ability to roam the high seas and women were left in demure obscurity on shore, waiting to be discovered and claimed by some suitor.³²

In *The Recruiting Officer*, Melinda and Sylvia show their lack of agency through their actions and words, as well as in their address. Like children, they had no last names, but their male counter parts did.

“*The Provoked Husband*”

George Farquhar wrote another Restoration comedy, *The Beaux Stratagem*, that was also performed as part of their first round of twenty four plays when they came to the colonies in 1752. It featured an unhappily married couple who went so far as to divorce, an unusual plot twist for the times. However, it is not the only play performed in the colonies that featured an unhappy couple, *The Provoked Husband* is another such play.³³

This play indicated the prevailing bridal power dynamic by highlighting an already existing marriage and revealed the way that a woman might look back at the marriage decision after she had made it. This play was first performed at Drury Lane in 1728, and according to

³² Farquhar, *The Recruiting Officer*, 16.
³³ Farquhar, *The Beaux Stratagem*, and Dunlop, 4.
William Dunlap, it was among the first plays presented in the colonies, when the Hallam company came to America in 1752.34

This is the tale of the marriage of Lord and Lady Townly. In the beginning of the play, Lady Townly flaunts tradition and lives a life in which she ignores her husband’s desire for a quiet life at home. This causes Lord Townly to wonder why she married him in the first place, and as a result, Lord and Lady Townly have a discussion of marriage and what its purpose was for a lady of her nature:

Lord Townly. “Now then recollect your thoughts and tell me seriously why you married me?”  
Lady T. “You insist upon the truth you say? I think—I married to take off that restraint that lays upon my pleasures while I was a single woman!”  
Lord T. “How madam is any woman under less restraint after marriage than before it?”  
Lady T. “Oh my Lord! My Lord! They are quite different creatures! Wives have infinite liberties in life that would be terrible for an unmarried woman to take!”  
Lord T. “Name one.”  
Lady T. “Fifty if you please—To begin then in the morning- a married woman may have men at her toilet, invite them to dinner, appoint them a party in the stage box at a play; engross the converstion there, call ‘em by there Christian names, talk louder than the players- from thence jaunt into the city…” 35

Lady Townly goes on to say that the customs of the land and not the law have made things the way they are for married and single women. Later, Lord Townly’s friend tells him that he has given his wife too much power and that “she is no longer in possession of herself.” Townly responds, “Oh Manly, tis too true! There’s the source of my disquiet! She knows and has abused her power.” The play allows Lady Townly her reign through much of the play and by the end the play pulls her back sharply upon her marital leash. Lord Townly discovers that she has become badly indebted due to gambling and this is his response,

“Pooh, your spirit grows ridiculous— you have neither honor, worth or innocence to support it…Have you not every other vice that debases your birth or stains the heart of a woman? Is not your health, your beauty, husband, fortune, family disclaimed—for nights consumed in riot and extravagance? …I have done with you!”

Dramatic justice forces Lady Townly to pay for her licentiousness and her husband casts her out, but that is not the end of it for her. She is penitent and cries,

“Oh support me. Save me. Hide me from this world!” and then explains, “Before I was your bride my Lord, the flattering world talked me into beauty…when a father’s firm commands enjoined me to make the choice of one I even then declined the liberty he gave me and to his own election yielded up my youth…Our hands were joined- but still my heart wedded to its folly. My only joy was power…the husband’s right to rule I thought a vulgar law.”

After her confession all that remained was abject humility and penitence for having thrown aside the submissive role of yielding wife. Lady Townly cries, “What then remains in my condition but resignation to your pleasure? I dare not hope for pardon…” Lord Townly is overcome by her confession and he confesses, “By heaven! The yielding hand!..My new born joy! See here! The bride of my desires! This may be called my wedding day!”

This play implied that a wedding to a bride who does not eschew agency, who does not yield power to her husband is no wedding at all. Lady Townly repents her independent action and a true bride is born.

Lady Townly perfectly reflects the view of the bride within colonial plays. It was the view of a woman who needed to be kept within the tight constraints of marriage in submission to her groom. The theater in the colonies was a very English affair. According to Odai Johnson and William J. Burling’s comprehensive calendar of the plays performed in America, eight of the thirteen most popular plays in England were also popular in the American colonies. These

36 Vanbrugh, 15, 81.
37 Vanbrugh, 86.
dramas highlighted English struggles and difficulties with marriage and courtship. A play that reflects the interest that audiences in England and the colonies had in marriage and courtship is *The Conscious Lovers* by Richard Steele, it had no less than three courtships and pending marriages interwoven through its melodramatic plot. This play’s window into the English sensibilities that governed marriage and courtship was of great interest to audiences in the colonies. Plays which conveyed English social mores served as artistic boundaries to keep Old World culture in and New World savagery out. The message was clear: Patriarchy was needed to civilize the colonies, and violations from within colonial society like brides exercising choice threatened social order and the civilizing mission. Colonial Americans saw on stage what they wanted to see, women with carefully suppressed agency.\(^{38}\)

The first act of the American theater, ended in 1766 with a riot in New York City at the Chapel Street Theater. A resolution that the Sons of Liberty made after the passage of the Stamp Act motivated the melee. The resolution stated, “to not admit the strollers arrived here to act, though the British General has given them permission.” Zealous patriots prevented the actors from entering the theater to perform for two days and then on the third night, a riot broke out and the rioters pulled the theater apart board by board and built a bonfire with the pieces.\(^{39}\)

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The period of time between 1765 and 1788 was one of tremendous change. The colonies became a republic. It was the first of its kind, and this both reflected and created shifts in the ways that Americans saw themselves. The stage was a place in which at first colonists and then independent citizens could see their own identities displayed, as if looking in a three dimensional mirror. It was at this time that the stage started to become American in character, rather than a mere British offshoot. The people of Boston, New York, Williamsburg, and Philadelphia still went to see British fare, but attended American works as well. Historian Jeffrey H. Richards argues that even the predominantly English repertoire did not limit Americans to only seeing British content on the American stage. He contends that audiences and actors altered the framework of the British plays to “Americanize” them by changing the acting or production to suit the audience.

The stage at this time had a great deal to present about American women, because during the American Revolution, they did not just sit idly by and watch men pursue the fight for independence without them. In fact, women served on both sides and in many capacities during the war. Linda Kerber states that the female effort in the war was clear, but that it was not conducted under the auspices of any institution. In general, women served the patriotic cause with individual efforts. Women rendered their service to the war effort by many means. They limited their household consumption and served as nurses, laundresses, camp followers, and land ladies. However, Kerber states, “Despite the increasing sophistication of the male public, women

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41 Richards, *Drama, Theater and Identity in the American New Republic*, III.
were left with only the most primitive of political mechanisms: the personal and collective petition.\textsuperscript{43} Kerber believes that women were not able to realize the liberty that the Revolution brought about until many years later because the women’s domestic realm and the men’s political realm remained far apart, even after the war. \textsuperscript{44}

Mary Beth Norton comes to a different conclusion; she contends that the Revolutionary War broke barriers that had kept colonial women from participating in political life. She demonstrates her contention by quoting Abigail Adams, who began the war years with this sentiment, “I can serve my partner, my family and myself and enjoy the satisfaction in consciousness of having discharged my duty to the public.”\textsuperscript{45} Two years later, she boldly stated that she was “…satisfied in the consciousness of having discharged my duty to the public.”\textsuperscript{46} Adams went from being able to serve the world at large through the conduit of her family and husband, to feeling that she was able to make a contribution on her own. This is a remarkable change in agency. Norton believes that this marks a temporary erasure between the feminine private realm and the male public one. She argues that women took definite strides to acquire more agency during the Revolution, but that the real gains remained ambiguous at the war’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{47}

Until the Stamp Act, Americans were somewhat content to emulate the manners and tastes of English theater. However, full-blown Restoration comedies of manners needed to be toned down and adjusted for American tastes. After the passage of the Stamp Act, the calm and

\textsuperscript{43} Kerber, \textit{Women of the Republic}, 38.
\textsuperscript{44} Kerber, \textit{Women of the Republic}, 287.
\textsuperscript{45} Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, 297.
\textsuperscript{46} Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, 297.
\textsuperscript{47} Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, 298.
peaceful emulation of England’s manners and tastes in theater changed and drama began to take a different turn.48

The plays I analyzed for the Revolutionary years were Thomas Arne’s *Love in a Village*, Sheridan’s classic comedy of errors, *A School for Scandal*, Andrew Barton’s *The Disappointment*, and Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast*. With the exception of *The Disappointment*, each play was performed before eager crowds during and after the war. There were 73 plays published in America between 1766 and 1788 and I chose these four because they represent different periods of time and thus different sensibilities and variant shifts in agency during the turbulent years of the war. Sheridan’s work is British and found such great popularity on both sides of the ocean that it was retooled later as a pamphlet for the Patriot cause. *The Disappointment* was written at the beginning of the Imperial Crisis and found no success on stage. *The Contrast* was written and performed after the war and was thoroughly American, both in authorship and subject.49 *Love in a Village* was performed primarily in the years shortly after the passage of the Stamp Act.

“*Love in a Village*”

The Hallem Douglas American Company first performed *Love in a Village* in the colonies on February 10, 1766 at the Queen Street Theater in Charleston. They performed it

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again at the Southwark Theater in Philadelphia in March of 1767. It played until the Congressional Congress’s directive closed colonial theaters in 1774. 50

The central plot line of *Love in a Village*, is about marital choice. The heroine of the play is a young bride-to-be, who is terrified of the choice that her father might make for her. In her fear she runs away from her upper-class home, and becomes a chambermaid in a large household nearby. Unknown to her, the young gardener on the estate is a fiancé who is horrified by his father’s choice for him and has also run away from his upper-class home to take on a servant position. There are two other thwarted couples in the play as well, and all of the characters enact the dramatic decisions for or against love and marriage.

There are three questions to be kept in mind when looking at the dialogue in this play regarding marital choice: Did the bride to be have a say in her marriage choice? How is the bride communicating her preference, and finally, is she the instigator of the marital choice? In a scene in Act One, the young heroine, Rosetta stands in the garden in the home of her employer. She speaks to her closest friend and confident, Lucinda, who stopped by to see her. Rosetta makes an impassioned argument for her exile and addresses her bridal decision or lack thereof directly by speaking about her own opinion regarding her future,

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“My hearts my own, my will is free,
And so shall be my voice
No mortal man shall wed with me,
Till first he’s made my choice
Love parents rule, cry nature’s laws
And children still obey,
And there is then no saving clause,
Against tyrannic sway”.
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This shows that the bride clearly has no say in her matrimonial destiny, at least in the beginning of the play. She is protesting this situation in the clearest way possible and labels the authority that denies her freedom to choose, tyrannical. And she rejects that authority, declaring that, “No mortal man shall wed with me, till first he’s made my choice.” This is a bold stance. Rosetta is saying that she will not wed a man who has not made her choice. This can be thought of in two ways, either she wants the ability to make the decision on her own terms or she wants her groom to have contiguous agency, like two streams in a river joining and going further in the same direction.

Later at the end of the play, the audience sees how this subtle variance plays out when Rosetta actually becomes acquainted with the man of her choosing, her fellow runaway, Thomas, the gardener, formerly known as Young Meadows. After his confession of love, she states,

“Why, if I did love you, I can assure you, you would never be the better for it—women are apt enough to be weak; we cannot always answer for our inclinations, but it is in our power to give way to them; and if I was so silly; I say, if I was so indiscreet, which I hope I am not, as to entertain a proper regard, when people’s circumstances are quite unsuitable and there are obstacles in the way that cannot be surmounted.”  

At this point the two agree never speak to one another again because they are unsuitable for one another due to their poverty. In this instance the bride has made the choice against love and marriage. She has regulated herself. The groom, however, instigated the question and brought the matter to the young woman to consider.

Further on in the play, the two come together again under different circumstances. The play reveals that young Meadows is a gentleman and not a lowly gardener. Rosetta must explain her reaction to this news. She reveals that she loved him even as a gardener, but, “had I not looked upon him as a person so much below me, I would have had no objection to receiving his

courtship”. Rosetta again shows that she is regulating her own choice of groom.53

Finally, the two guardians become involved and they reveal that Meadows and Rosetta were intended for one another all along. As happens in comedy operettas, chance weaves together a happy ending for all concerned and in this case, supports the hierarchy. The guardians were right from the onset.

_Love in a Village_ put the dynamics of bridal choice clearly before the colonial audience and as in _The Orphan_, the lovers are misguided in their decision to cut themselves off from their guardians when making their marital decisions. But there is one important distinction between the two plays. In _The Orphan_, the two young lovers are thoroughly and tragically in the wrong in their choices, and they end in despair. The lovers in _Love in a Village_ were correct in their marital decisions and they were vindicated by fact that their guardian’s choices were the same as theirs all along. Volition had much happier consequences in _Love in a Village_ than it did in _The Orphan_. Johnson and Burling report that the first recorded performance of _Love in a Village_ was in 1766, and the first recorded performance of _The Orphan_ was in 1735. The American colonies viewed their decision making differently at those two dates and the two plays reflect that distinction in their views of marital decision making as well.

_A School for Scandal_

Sheridan’s enduring comedy of manners, was no less popular when it was first performed in London in the 1770s and on the New York stage during the British occupation. _A School for Scandal_ was at one time rewritten for print publication in 1779, from the patriot point of view.

53 Arne, 58.
The bibliographer Charles Evans, who was the collector of the archival print matter in which the retooled publication was located, prefaced the rewritten *The School for Scandal* in this way, “While the characters are the same as represented in Sheridan's play of the same title, the text is not his text, but an imposition, political in purpose, with regard to English affairs during the American Revolution.”\(^{54}\)

*The School For Scandal* is a Restoration comedy, a classic that has been played and replayed from its first run at Drury Lane to Broadway in New York in 2001. It is quite clever, and has at its center the vagaries of love, both before and after marriage. The marriage of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle displays what a bride ought not to be. As is often the case in Restoration comedies, the characters are given names that hint at their types within the play. Lady Teazle is no exception, and her character follows her name, for she is a tease and a torment to her older husband Sir Peter.\(^{55}\)

In the beginning of the play, Sir Peter finds that he has come to the end of his patience for his wife,

> “When an old Bachelor takes a young Wife—what is He to expect—'Tis now six months since Lady Teazle made me the happiest of men—and I have been the most miserable Dog ever since that ever committed wedlock. We tift a little going to church—and came to a Quarrel before the Bells had done ringing—I was more than once nearly chok'd with gall during the Honeymoon.”\(^{56}\)

Sir Peter repents his marriage to a much less sophisticated person than himself, country bred and younger bride, due to the fact that she has begun to love luxury and high society and has found it to be diverting to flirt with young men. She defends her behavior by saying,

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\(^{54}\) David Francis Taylor, “The Fate of Empires, The American War, Political Parody and Sheridan’s Comedies”, *Eighteenth Century Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009),388, and Evans attributed to John Leacock, Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800.

\(^{55}\) Miller, 30.

“Sir Peter—Sir Peter you—may scold or smile, according to your Humour[,] but I ought to have my own way in everything, and what's more I will too—what! tho' I was educated in the country I know very well that women of Fashion in London are accountable to nobody after they are married.” Sir Peter responds, “Very well! ma'am very well! so a husband is to have no influence, no authority?” To which Lady Teazle replies, “Authority! no, to be sure—if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me and not married me[.] I am sure you were old enough.”

Young Lady Teazle enjoys her power as a wife and means to exercise it. There is a comeuppance for her; however, before the play concludes in which her error is fully revealed to her and she repents and finds her rightful place in the proper scheme of marital order. Humiliated by her hijinks, she dutifully puts herself back under her husband’s authority.

Lady Teazle has a monologue for the epilogue of the play in which she fully explains her proper place as a bride.

“I who was so volatile and gay,  
Like a tradewind, must now blow all one way,  
Bend all my cares, my studies, and my vows,  
To one dull dusty weathercock-my spouse!  
So wills our virtuous bard- the motley Bayes,  
Of crying epilogues and laughing plays!”

This epilogue was not written by Sheridan, who felt that the body of the play was sufficient to mark the humbling of the bride. The epilogue was added by the manager of the theater, Mr. George Colman the Elder, in which it was first produced and still remained in the written transcript of the play presented in 1917. The bride’s rebellious streak not only needed to be quelled within the work performed it also needed embellishment with a final blow as the entire company prepared to leave the stage.

57 Sheridan, A School for Scandal, 33.  
58 Sheridan, 131.  
59 Sheridan, 131.
Society shifted at the time of the performance of *A School for Scandal*. It was staged in America in an occupied city during the Revolutionary War. David Francis Taylor tells us that when the Continental Congress declared that the theaters had to be closed in October of 1774, Military thespians performed *A School for Scandal* in 1778 and 1782. Taylor refers to a contemporary commentator’s referral to Sheridan’s plays as a “peaceful invasion of the American scene.” Sheridan’s play represents a painful goodbye to thoroughly British drama on American shores, at least for the war years. Its representation of the bride as someone to be humbled and managed into submission is almost a swan song of imperialism. The treatment of the bride in *A School for Scandal* paralleled how the British treated the colonists: as subjects who needed to be managed into submission.

*The Disappointment*

A play that clearly demonstrates a turning from imperialism in American sentiment especially as seen in the character of the bride, is Andrew Barton’s *The Disappointment*. This play, set to be performed in Philadelphia in 1767, featured local events surrounding the search of gullible locals for pirate’s treasure on the Delaware River. Sadly, the production came to a halt and was not performed on the stage because the events featured were so local. According to Miller, the producer withdrew the presentation “due to personal reflections unfit for the stage.” *The Disappointment*, because of its local authorship and its composition after the passage of the

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60 Taylor, “The Fate of Empires”, 388.
61 Taylor, “The Fate of Empires”, 388.
62 Miller, 23.
Stamp Act, highlights a unique colonial tension predominant at the time, the tension of between being American and being British.63

An American, Andrew Barton wrote *The Disappointment*. The play, as the name suggests, was a disappointment because it was never produced. Barton introduces a new element in the relationship between the bride and groom that was not significant in *A School for Scandal*, *The Provoked Husband* or *The Recruiting Officer* or in the comedies of their time. There is a guardian who is involved in the contention over the bride. Though *The Orphan* featured a guardian, his struggle over the bride was not direct. The previous popular plays produced in the colonies featured the solitary struggle of grooms to tame their young untested brides. The new wave of plays that were written by American authors during the Revolutionary era involved a struggle between two rivals for the more passive bride’s affections. It is as if the grownups, the groom and the guardian, had their talk after they had instructed the bride to leave the room,. *The Disappointment* is an excellent example of this new dynamic.

Along with the doings of pirate treasure, *The Disappointment* had at its center a love story between young Meanwell and Lucy. Lucy states:

“He (uncle) has been frequently dinning in my ears that, if I marry agreeable to him within these three days, he’s to give me 1000 pounds to my portion- and further declared, that if I ever spoke to you he’d disown me.” 64

On the day before their wedding Lucy informed her fiancé, Meanwell, of the fact that her guardian, and uncle, Mr. Washball, offered to pay her off in order to marry according to his wishes.

Lucy goes on to tell Meanwell that her guardian means to sail to England the next day to receive a title that he has set his heart on. Lucy’s guardian is tied to the old world of European

64 Barton, *The Disappointment* 25.
pretentions and wants her to marry to his advantage. Despite her uncle’s opposition, Meanwell assured Lucy that he will marry her. Lucy, however, is very concerned for her reputation which is in the balance at the critical moment before her wedding. She states:

“Our affair is carried too far for us to retreat without subjecting ourselves to the laughter of the town- you know my dear Meanwell a girl’s character under these circumstances seldom escapes censure.”

Meanwell replies:

“..The world is very censurous and slander like a snowball always gathers by rolling..my affection for you is too firm, to be shaken by scandalous tongues…”

Lucy replies:

“Be assured, your generous love shall be repaid in virtue, tenderness and respect.”

Lucy makes her decision known at this time and has gone along with Meanwell to oppose her guardian. Lord Washball finds that his plan has been foiled and all of his hopes for entitlement are lost and further, he finds the young lovers just wed. He is enraged, but is quickly pacified by the fact that the deed is done. He states, “Oh dear, O lack-a-day! Well if the knot is tied there is no untying it now…but remember children, bare walls make giddy housewives.” Uncle Washball is easily cowed and sent on his way, and Lucy is won. Lucy has done little or nothing to determine her fate other than to ride the wave of the gentle tangle between her authorities.

In the struggle for brides in plays of this era, the groom’s nemesis is either old or effete. There is a power imbalance between the antagonists, young verses old or strong and masculine verses weak and effeminate. Jason Shaffer describes patriotic plays of the American Revolutionary Era as having “three familiar elements of the tyrant, the sacrificial victim and the

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66 Barton, 54.
patriot. If Shaffer’s typology is correct and characters represent the struggle of the patriot against the diminishing tyrant, King George III, then *The Disappointment* is an example of this. The patriot, Meanwell vanquishes the tyrant, silly old Uncle Washball with ease. This ease reflects the optimism of the patriotic young author.

*The Disappointment* was written in the early days of the patriotic movement in 1767 and while it expresses umbrage at older authorities in the person of the guardian, it is quiet and respectful and he is easily dispatched. In this play. The bride’s agency is weak, she is strong enough to align with the groom and defy the guardian but not strong enough to act on her own behalf. She makes her wishes known, but makes no move to instigate her own fate. It is not until later during the war, that the struggle for the victim in the person of the innocent bride becomes a more difficult struggle. This heightened tension is shown in *The Contrast*. 67

*The Contrast*

*The Contrast*, Royal Tyler’s play is the first work written by an American that was professionally performed on the stage. *The Contrast* was performed on stages in America at the same time that the theater reemerged from a long sleep. Before the Revolutionary War, theater in America was almost entirely British. English citizens wrote, produced and performed the plays, and only the audiences were American. Due to a directive made by the Continental Congress, during the war, nonessentials like entertainment would be banned. The English took their plays, their actors, their costumes and their sets and left for Jamaica. The Hallam Company, the premier theatrical troupe in colonial America, decamped for the West Indies in 1774. When they

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returned in 1784, they performed several English comedies, including Sheridan’s *A School for Scandal*. In 1787, they performed *The Contrast* at a theater in New York four times. This was a remarkable transition for the company and for theater in general.\(^{68}\)

*The Contrast* was not only penned by an American, it was also a political tale told in the form of a comedy. Shaffer says that “in romance, the tale of the revolution is told.”\(^ {69}\) It is modeled on the comedies of Sheridan, and Shaffer notes that it is very similar to *A School for Scandal*, so much so that it has been called derivative. Shaffer also remarks on its departures from Sheridan’s comedy. In *A School for Scandal*, virtue is pitted against hypocrisy, and in *The Contrast*, good Yankee down-to-earth virtue is pitted against British vice and hypocrisy. There is another essential difference, however, for the same element that was introduced into *The Disappointment* is present in *The Contrast*. In pre-revolutionary America, the groom desired to tame his rebellious wife in order to have a properly submissive bride. In the Revolutionary Era, the groom had to conquer her guardian to win her.\(^{70}\)

This is a rather startling shift, and it can be interpreted in political terms. Shaffer, Dunlap and Miller establish that American drama presented during the Revolutionary era was political in nature. Clearly, the events within the plays have political meaning. The events revolving around the main plots of *The Disappointment* and *The Contrast* and a great many more of the plays published and produced in America were romantic in nature. These romantic, dramatic events within the plays can therefore be interpreted in a political way.

Further, it should be noted that a great many of the plays that were popular on the early American stage were comedies that told the tale of love and marriage. In an accounting of the

\(^{68}\) Dunlop, 36; Miller, 23, 27; Shaffer, 66.

\(^{69}\) Shaffer, 169.

\(^{70}\) Shaffer, 169-170
371 plays that were published in America from 1714 through 1819, 199 were concerned with matters of love and marriage. This is not surprising when one considers how interesting plays of this nature are to audiences to this day. Popular music, novels, opera, movies, and plays still concern themselves with matters of love and marriage. It is of elemental interest to wonder how people will connect and recreate and perpetuate the species. It is a deeply political subject, and it is highly personal as well. It is a subject that drama tackles repeatedly.  

The Contrast had its own small contribution to make in answering the question of connection in the years shortly after the American victory over the British. The central plot line of The Contrast is the romantic entanglements of the bookish and demure Maria and her carefree and flirtatious friend Charlotte. The play opens with a scene in which Maria’s friend Charlotte is speaking to Maria after having been accused of being a libertine.

“My dear little prude are we not all such libertines…Man!-My Letitia!- Man! For whom we dress, walk, dance, talk, lisp, laugh, and smile. Does not the grave spectator allure us that even our own depraved diffidence, modesty, and blushes are all directed to make ourselves good wives and mothers as fast as we can?”

This question is posed, and we are on the edges of our seats awaiting the working out of the answer.

Later in the play, Charlotte’s female contrast is featured. Chaste and quiet Maria is speaking of her desire for love and marriage with her guardian, Mr. Vanrough. His answer is quick and as rough as his name implies.

Vanrough: Pooh Pooh, nonsense, downright nonsense child, this comes from reading your serious books; your Charles Grandisons; your sentimental journals, your Robinson Crusoes, and other such trumpery. No, no, no child, it is money that makes the mare go, keep your eye on the main chance Mary.

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71 America’s Historical Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800.
72 Tyler, The Contrast, 2.
Maria: Marriage is a serious affair…I mean, sir, that as a marriage is a portion for life and so intimately involves our happiness we cannot be too considerate in the choice of our companion.

Vanrough: And pray Mary, an’t you going to marry the man of your choice- what trumpery notion is this? It is these vile books [throwing them away]I’d have you to know, Mary, if you won’t make young Van Dumpling, the man of your choice, you shall marry him as the man of my choice!

Maria: You terrify me sir, I am all submission. The choice is yours…I do not doubt your love Sir. And it is my duty to obey you- I will endeavor to make my duty and inclinations go hand in hand.73

Maria is only too glad to acquiesce to Vanrough for she is a virtuous girl and knows her place in the world. She is meant to defer to the wished of those who have authority over her. Her fate is not in her own hands, her choice, her agency is in the hands of greater powers, her guardian Vanrough, and after her marriage, her groom.

Maria ends up becoming betrothed not to Van Dumpling, but to the young man whom her guardian ultimately preferred, Billy Dimple. Dimple is a false young man, the true villain of the piece. He is a flirtatious, hypocritical wastrel and it is revealed in a conversation that he has with the hero of the play, Manly.

Billy Dimple: How delicious it is to excite the emotions of joy, hope, expectation, and delight in the bosom of a lovely girl, who believes every tittle of say to be serious.

Manly: Serious sir! In my opinion the man who under pretentions of marriage can plant thorns in the bosom of an innocent unsuspecting girl, is more detestable than a common robber, in the same proportion as private violence is more despicable than open force, and money is of less value than happiness…Female conversation softens our manners, whilst our discourse from the superiority of our literary discourse improves their minds. But in our young country where there is no such thing as gallantry, when a gentleman speaks of love to a lady, whether he mentions marriage or not, he ought to conclude either that he means to insult her or that his intentions are most serious and honorable.74

73 Tyler, 11-12.
74 Tyler, 51.
Manly is a true patriot, a plain and simple, yet well bred man who will prove to be Maria’s true love. Because Maria will not reject her guardian’s choice it will be up to Manly to fight for Maria’s hand. He will have to fight the authority of the older guardian and the knavery of the young flirt, Billy Dimple. In the end Dimple is unmasked when Manly interrupts Dimple’s attempted rape of Charlotte. Manly brandishes a sword and fights for justice and Dimple is defeated. Thus the guardian and rival are subdued and manly gains Maria’s hand in marriage.

It is significant that during the Revolutionary War, the most successful play penned by an American author was one in which the groom had to fight two people for his bride. In past dramas, the groom had to subdue the rebellious bride himself and later with the introduction of her guardian, he needed to win her from another person of more formidable authority. Now in the throes of the Revolution the groom had to win the now subdued and passive bride against another foe, the rival. These romantic machinations reflect political events and follow a chronology that is clear. As the fighting in the Revolutionary War became more severe and prolonged, the groom in the plays fought more strenuously for his prize.

Shaffer speaks of the fact that women and children were viewed at least in some sense, as property, during the Revolutionary Era. He also enlightens the phenomena of a hero of a play who plays the part of “the patriot” who rescues innocents from harm. He calls it the “cast of characters (who) contain the familiar elements of the tyrant, sacrificial victim and the patriot.” 75

In the new revolutionary times the groom’s dilemma is reframed from a rival’s point of view. The passive bride is sought by a groom who must fight for his bride the way that the patriots needed to fight for their liberty. In The Disappointment, Meanwell had to wrest his bride from an easily toppled Mr. Washball and later in The Contrast, Manly had to not only topple a

75 Shaffer, 170.
far more intransigent authority in Vonrough, he also had to vanquish Billy Dimple. *The Contrast*, which was written during the war years, reflected a far greater struggle than *The Disappointment*, which was written in the years preceding the war.

In British colonial drama, the bride was at first resistant but in the end a compliant partner. The possibilities for allegorical interpretation are interesting. For the bride in English pre-revolutionary drama represented a conqueror’s problem. A question that an imperialist would ask was answered in those plays. How does one keep one’s conquest in line?

In Revolutionary American drama the question regarding the bride was reframed from a rival’s point of view. The question was no longer how to keep a bride, but rather how to win a bride. In the plays of the early Republic it might be seen that the question was reframed yet again, it became a question that a young winner might ask. It is remarkably similar to the kind of question an imperialist might pose: Once won, how is a bride controlled?

*Act III*

*1795-1810*

After the Revolution it took time for the theater to find a foothold once again in public life, but once it did return, audiences embraced it with enthusiasm. It became a center of entertainment for all classes of people. Lower prices and a better standard of living filled the theaters with working class audiences. Before the Revolution, the cost of tickets for the cheapest tickets in the pit-seat had cost a full day’s wages, now it cost a third. David Grimstead states that
after the Revolution, “the theater was the major form of entertainment to all classes of people and that it was the art-form that was most dependent on personal appeal.”

There was controversy surrounding the theater during the early years of the Republic. It was a political forum. As political viewpoints solidified and factionalism grew as a consequence, the theaters reflected this. In Boston there were two theaters built in the 1790s: one a federalist venue aptly named the Federal Street Theater, and the other a Democratic Republican play house called The Chestnut Street Theater. When a customer purchased a ticket to attend a play at the Chestnut, they would be asked to sign an oath never to attend the Federal Street Theater. These conflicts were often over what was seen as high brow or lowbrow entertainment.

During the Revolutionary War, women began to find a role in the public realm. Women served as nurses and caretakers, landlords and petitioners. Although women were never given the opportunity for a full share of political responsibility, their roles expanded enough to make the future slightly uncomfortable. Change brings discomfort and the shifts in agency that the war brought about for women, made it difficult for them to find their place in times of peace. In reference to the play, *Slaves in Algiers*, Marion Rust states that, “(The heroine) placed their own self interest beneath their brethren..(and)..enacted republican virtue by offering themselves (often literally) on the altar of service to their fellow man. Such heroines thereby qualified themselves for political agency in the new Republic, despite their exclusion from the polis they

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Women were able to find a place in the shifting society of the new Republic by identifying themselves with self-sacrifice and virtue.

During the Revolution, the idea of the Republican Mother was born, and it became increasingly important during the early Republic. This notion of noble motherhood was a new identity that women were able to take on in the early Republic that allowed them to find an honored place in society. Kerber states that the Enlightenment had “little room for women as political beings.” She believes that in the search for a place, women found one in melding their private virtues with a Republican ideal of civic virtue. This came into fruition with the idea of Republican Motherhood.

The collection of plays that are included in this project for Act Three are, *Slaves in Algiers or A Struggle for Freedom* by Susannah Haswell Rowson, *The Weathercock* by John Til Allingham, and *The Poor Soldier*, by John O’Keefe. 140 plays published in America are listed in Early American Imprints between 1795 and 1819, and of those plays, at least forty-five concerned courtship and marriage. Professional theater troupes performed all three plays investigated here on the American stage. All three were tremendously popular and all featured brides who made choices about marriage that revealed their agency.

*Slaves in Algiers*

*Slaves in Algiers* was first performed on June 30, 1794 at Philadelphia’s Chestnut Street Theater. This play was presented at a time when the young Republic and other countries in Europe, were dealing with difficulties involving Barbary pirates. It was a subject in the minds of

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79 Kerber, 11.
the audience, and Rowson’s play kept with the concerns of the time. *Slaves in Algiers* was so popular that although Rowson wrote other plays and novels, she was always introduced publicly as “Rowson of the New Theater, Philadelphia.”

*Slaves in Algiers* has at the center of its plot, the fair maiden, Olivia. An Islamic sultan held her father captive, and Olivia bravely offers to marry him in order to secure her father’s freedom. Ultimately, the sultan frees her and she reunites with her father in the end. This simple story is one that enhances the bride’s role from that of a passive bystander to that of being a paragon of self-sacrifice and virtue as well as a symbol for freedom.

This is an interesting twist in the tale of bridal agency in drama. The bride is no longer held captive by the groom who has won her; she is bested this time by her own commitment to sacrificial virtue. Marion Rust poses the idea that Rowson’s vision of female self-sacrifice shows how submission for women became not the opposite of power, but a kind of power. Rust goes on to say that for Rowson, “female passivity possessed an appeal that was erotic in its intensity.”

The bride at the center of another play by another Republican Era female playwright, Hannah More, illustrates this phenomenon. In it the young and virtuous bride has a perception of marital power that she gains by denying her own will.

*Slaves in Algiers* brings this kind of intense self-abnegation to light. Her betrothed Sultan holds Olivia captive and she pines for liberty, “In the first place I wish for liberty” she wrote, “…is the poor bird who is captive in a cage (because a favorite of her enslaver) consoled for the

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82 Rust, 116.
loss of freedom?" Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers* 2.

Rowson is making a very interesting point here with her heroine’s sacrifice for her father’s liberty. Here, Olivia is a hero and she has found glory in her sacrifice, and in so doing she found her share in liberty. The patriots who fought for liberty were not quite comfortable with what it meant for those who were not like themselves. There was no proper share of liberty for those who did not have their attributes. There was no comfortable way to give women their portion either. However, Rowson finds a way for women to take their part and run with it. Libertine women such as Lady Townly or Lady Teazdale threatened the peace of society within the private confines of the home. With *Slaves in Algiers* and her other writings that feature self-sacrificial women, Susannah Rowson did what Linda Kerber states that women had to do at the birth of the American Republic, “If American women were to count themselves as daughters of the American liberty they had to invent their own ideology.”

*The Weathercock*

The popular play, *The Weathercock* by John Till Allingham, features a heroine who was remarkably adept at invention. Allingham’s plays were popular in America in the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to the Shaw-Shoemaker archivists, *The Weathercock* was performed in the New York Theater prior to 1808. It is a farcical comedy of manners, played for laughs, but with an underlying patriotic message. Tice Miller states that farces were popular with
Republican audiences because they tended to lend themselves to middle class and egalitarian tastes than the dramas and tragedies that were so popular in the middle of the previous century.  

*The Weathercock* was performed and published ten years after *Slaves in Algiers* and represents a fuller turning of the identity of the bride. In this play, the groom, Tristan, is a silly young man who cannot find his way in the world, and his guardian is frustrated with the fact that Tristan cannot settle into a profession. Tristan finally falls in love with a virtuous young woman, the bride, Variella and finds his own way in the world. His guardian is happy, the groom is happy, and the worthy Variella is happy. The young groom, Tristan, is as changeable as a weathercock, until he has found the solid virtue and resolution of his young bride.

At the climax of the play, young Tristan finally finds the bride of his dreams, and he makes his wishes known.

Tristan: Verily I do expect the damsel to join with me in the request, that we two be made one.
O. Ficke (Tristan’s father): And verily I do expect a damsel here to join in a laugh against a block head. Have done with this mummery!
Tristan: Do not be a scoffer.
O. Ficke: Now it is all settled. There my dear, look there; that is the precious youth I intended for your husband.
Variella: What that! Ha ha ha! Why surely that is a pasteboard man.- It is not alive!...
Tristan: What a magnificent being is this woman! I have slighted to run about after hurdy-gurdy girls and quakers- oh what a fool am I…I’ll go and hang myself!
(Tristan ultimately makes his proposal and his father exclaims relief)
O. Ficke: My boy’s come to his senses again!
Tristan: My future endeavor shall be to deserve such happiness!  

Variella though, is having none of it, for she wants Tristan to be stronger. She makes her wishes known here, and her agency is clear.

Variella is the ideal young Republican heroine. Through her own virtue she gives the young groom, Tristan, direction, and a reason to grow up and become a man. Variella embodies

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87 Miller, 4.
the role that Republican Mothers performed. Though her agency does not run so strong that she initiates Tristan’s proposal, she makes her wishes known, and her choice of groom must be made worthy before she is willing to accept him.

*Slaves in Algiers* and *The Weathercock* show in their differing ways this subordination of agency of the bride, by her own hand. By taking on the task of being noble and virtuous and self-sacrificing, women dutifully submitted to serving as helpmates to the movers in public society, their men. Kerber sheds light on this phenomenon, “The Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life. Dedicated as she was to the nurture of public-spirited male citizens, she guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic.”^89^ Political “virtue” a revolutionary concept that has troubled political thinkers from Edmund Burke to Hannah Arendt, could be safely domesticated in eighteenth-century America; the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality.”

*The Poor Soldier*

The Poor Soldier was remarkably popular with American audiences after the American Revolution. It was another one of the many plays that was said to be a favorite of George Washington’s, and after 1815, it became the most popular after-piece on American stages. It was popular in London before it found its footing in America. Its first outing was in Dublin in 1783 and it opened in London in 1784. According to Jeffrey Richards it was the fifth most popular drama in London in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.^90^ The bride featured in this play is named Norah. She is sought by the hero, a young Irish soldier named Patrick who just returned from fighting in the American Revolution. While he

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^89^ Kerber, 11  
was gone Captain Fitzroy, challenged his affections. Captain Fitzroy was a British officer who was supported by Norah’s guardian, Father Luke. The interplay between Patrick, Father Luke, and Norah gives a clear indication of the forces of agency at play.

In this scene, the guardian, Father Luke expresses his disapproval of Patrick and his favor of the British captain to his ward, Norah:

“Father. Luke: If you do not consent to marry Captain Fitzroy, the man of my choice, I will send you to France, and put you in a convent.” 91

Norah stands her ground and expresses her agency in defiance of her guardian:

“Norah: I am well content. I never will marry the man that I do not approve of.” 92

Father Luke expresses his rage in response:

“You are content! You put me in a passion,—and then you are content! Go, get you gone into that room, and there stay until you go to France, Mrs. Knapsack” 93

At this point, the Captain enters:

“Captain: Who is this that you are going to send to France?
Father Luke: My ward, Sir, who won't consent to marry you. She is robunxious. 94
Captain: Will you resign her to me, Sir?
Father Luke: With that key I deliver up my authority; and now if I find Mr. Patrick, her lover, I will send him to the county jail for a vagabond.—A jade! to lose the opportunity of making herself a lady.” 95

With these words, Father Luke forcefully expresses his will, and clearly states his position of authority over Norah. He stands in for all of Britain in this scene and one can almost feel the electricity in the air amidst Republican audiences as they hear his words.

Father Luke gets his comeuppance, however, from a surprising source. The young soldier Patrick enters, and Captain Fitzroy remembers his bravery in action and rewards it by

94 This is an archaic word which is directly quoted from the play.
95 O'Keefe, *The Poor Soldier*, 28
stepping aside. The captain graciously presents Patrick to Norah and vouches for him with


Captain: Dear Norah, since you have refused my hand, will you permit me to reward your
constancy, by putting you into the hands of your lover?
Norah: I'm all amazement, my Patrick!
Patrick: Let us kneel and thank our deliverer.
Captain: To keep you no longer in suspense, know then that I am that officer whose life
you saved at Johnson's Ferry at Carolina, in America; I have a commission to bestow,
which I now desire, gallant youth, you will take from me as a reward for your honour,
bravery and generosity.— I wanted to find you out.—Here, heaven bless you both.
Patrick: I could scarcely think you would remember your poor Soldier—but my gratitude
is too great for utterance.”96

Father Luke, the guardian races into the room and expresses his wonder at the change in
circumstances.

“What brings you with that fellow?
Captain: Come, Sir, don't abuse the man you'll shortly make your nephew.
Father Luke: Me bring a foot soldier into my family!
Captain: He's no longer so, Sir, I having a commission to dispose of, have given it
to him.
But captain, why do you give up my niece?
Captain: Because Sir, I have found such superior merit in this POOR
SOLDIER.”97

The bride, Norah expressed her preference for the groom, a young man who exhibited noble,
patriotic attributes, and thus humiliating the guardian and showing him to be a pompous fool.
The metaphors are rich and clear. The play allows the former colonies to view Britain in the
form of the Captain as a gracious loser and in the identity of the Guardian as a humiliated,
outmoded opponent. Norah’s agency in this tableau is shown in her exhibited loyalty to her
groom Patrick under adversity. The groom is a quiet conqueror throughout all.

_The Poor Soldier_ brought out fierce political feelings in Republican audiences.

Washington Irving describes the environment of early Republican theater galleries,

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96 O’Keefe, 30.
97 O’Keefe, 30, 31.
“Those in the gallery he described as making noises similar to that which prevailed in Noah’s ark and throwing apples, nuts and gingerbread on the heads of the honest folk in the pit. The gallery called for tunes by stamping, hissing, roaring, whistling. The honest folk in the pit were less noisy than those in the boxes or gallery. But even here the conversation was so incessant as to miss half the play, and they stand with their dirty boots on the seats of the benches.”98

Rowdy Republican audiences saw themselves depicted in the *The Poor Soldier*, and their response to what they saw was sometimes even violent. Susan Branson tells of a politically charged Boston audience that hissed at an actor who had the ill-luck to portray a silly Frenchman in *The Poor Soldier* in a 1796 performance. The audience did not stop at hissing their displeasure; they felt that what they saw on stage was a “libel on the character of the whole French nation.” Branson reports that “the theater was torn apart.”99

**Epilogue**

The entanglements that come with the decision to marry across many spectrums are social, economic, and religious. These various entanglements make the decision to marry of great significance. Marriage, courtship and engagement are still a highly ritualized and important events. The power to make the marriage decision is not an overt one, it is implied by action. Stephanie Coontz supports the notion that the decision making process that led to marriage changed dramatically in the 1790s. This time overlaps with momentous changes in Revolutionary America. The theater was the premier public forum in the fledgling US. Early republican theater portrayed marriage in its greatest state of flux in a country in its highest state

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98 Butsch, 36.
of flux. As marriage choices liberalized dramatically in the 1790s, they were portrayed that way on the American stage.

A great many of the plays that were popular on the American stage were ones that told tales of love and marriage. This is not so surprising when one considers what is of interest to audiences to this day. Popular music, novels, opera, movies, and plays concern themselves with matters of love and marriage. It is of elemental interest to wonder how people will connect and recreate and eventually repopulate the world. Marriage choice is a deeply political subject and highly personal matter and yet it is hidden behind a curtain of private domesticity.

Drama looks behind that private curtain repeatedly. Jeffrey Richards argues eloquently for the appropriate use of drama to explore cultural trends, he states,

“The play is a cultural artifact- it leaves a trace…A play is a hieroglyphic whose meanings are layers and threads of history [and] cultural practice…Each turn of the artifact reveals something else, a worn patch heretofore unseen, something older and more distant.”

David Grimstead adds that Revolutionary theater history “peculiarly reflects many of the new society’s intellectual problems.” Certainly Revolutionary Era drama offers clear insight into female agency through the study of depictions of marriage choices. Patriots fought for many reasons and above all they fought for liberty and equality. Linda Kerber states that the American men who fought in the Revolution did not know exactly what the changes sought in society would mean for women. In some ways the drama presented on American stages right after the war was a way to publicly explore what the patriots did not know. What did their new found liberty mean for women? What did it mean for the private world of reproductive politics and the liberty of brides?

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An examination of the most popular plays presented on the colonial and American stage between 1750 and 1820 reveals that though bridal choices were put into different terms and presented in different ways before, during, and after the Revolution, the bride remained passive in terms of instigating her choice. However, her expression of will in terms of her response to the request for her hand changed dramatically, and further the response of the powers around her changed as well. In the colonial era a recalcitrant bride was summarily put down for speaking her mind, and in the plays popularized during the Republican era, she was applauded for her good judgment. The modest rise in agency was remarkable and marked a beginning of change for women in the early American Republic. However, even with these strides, her private position was still retained. Political agency was still a thing of the future and it was only through the politicization of the private world, the ennobling of her mission through self sacrifice, that women were able to find a foothold in public life. The bride was in a position to say yea or nay but to pose the question, “Will you be my groom?” is still, in current times, a culturally uncomfortable phrase.
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