Varnum's "Ministerial Oppression," a Revolutionary Drama

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ABOUT 1760, the American colonies had attained that pitch of prosperity where the arts were beginning to become genuinely creative. The earliest immigrants had brought over their architecture, music, literature, and the like; but the result was not so much a transplanting of slips as a sowing of imported seed in a new soil and a different climate. Like the populace, the arts were reduced to the folk level and made a fresh start from there, developing new forms and techniques according to the public needs, and manifesting early those differences which were the dim beginnings of a national culture.

In music, for example, we know that the first colonists sang in and out of church, and had their musical instruments; but except for "Yankee Doodle," some verses of which celebrate the taking of Louisburg in 1745, we can find no traces of original music until 1759, in which year we can place the splendid ballad of "Brave Wolfe" and our first art-song, Hopkinson's "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free." The first original American hymn-tunes appeared in James Lyon's *Urania*, Philadelphia, 1761. Finally, in 1770, William Billings, our first professional composer, started a native school of music with his first publication, the *New England Psalm Singer*.

In painting, a similar tendency flowered about the same decade, but much more spectacularly. From the first, American sitters had insisted, as a matter of religious self-

respect, on being painted to look as they really were, in marked contrast to the foreign idealizing of aristocrats. Then in 1759, Benjamin West left Philadelphia, reached London in 1763, and became the official court painter to George III. Copley's "Boy with a Squirrel" was the Academy sensation in 1766, and after doing his best work here, he reached London in 1774, where he was soon followed by Stuart and Trumbull. This American group rivalled the best of contemporary painters anywhere.

It is not so well known that at the same time a similiar movement was taking place in the drama. About 1760, our first tragedy to be acted, Godfrey's *Prince of Parthia*, was finished, though not produced for seven years; in 1762, the first college dialogue to appear in print was published; in 1766, our first chronicle play, Cockings's *Conquest of Canada*, and also our first tragedy on a native subject, Rogers's *Ponteach*, were published in London; and the next year, 1767, Barton's *Disappointment*, our first native comedy (though technically a ballad opera) was published and nearly produced in Philadelphia, but was banned at the last moment, on account of personal satire, the *Prince of Parthia* being substituted.

Except for the *Prince of Parthia*, these plays used native material; and except for the *Conquest of Canada*, they used the traditional English forms. But in the case of Cockings, the new wine really burst the old bottle, and the result was something of a mess. Cockings himself admitted he did not know how to write a regular play; "but," he added, "I write an Historical Tragedy, and as an Historian, have endeavoured to display, in different Scenes, a Representation of real and genuine Facts, great in themselves, as any in our Times, and amply worthy of being registered in the Annals of Fame, as rival Actions of those Patriot Deeds, of the so much admired antient *Greeks* and *Romans*!"

In short, out of sheer ignorance, he was working towards the form demanded by his historical subject. However, he wrote in the Neo-classical Age; and Cockings was but the first of the many who compared deeds in the New World to those of antiquity. Wolfe's fellow generals are named "Leonatus" and "Britannicus," while his mother and sweetheart are stage Romans rather than realistic Britishers. I have no doubt he intended the actors to wear Roman helmets and corselets. Not until six years later, in 1772, did Benjamin West startle London with his painting of the "Death of Wolfe," in which, over the protests of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Archbishop Drummond, and the king himself, West represented the heroes of 1759 in correct regimentals, thus initiating the modern school of historical painting.

As Cockings's play was reprinted in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Albany, there is a good chance that amateurs tried it out at once, although we have no actual record of a performance before 1773. Amateur theatricals were coming into fashion, despite the clerical opposition north and south. All the sects condemned the theater, with the exception of the Universalists; in fact, the Reverend John Murray, who introduced Universalism to America, was to marry Judith Sargent, a leading light of the "Comedian Society" at Gloucester, and author of two plays produced professionally in Boston.

The religious objection, however, was directed against the theater rather than the drama. Actors were vagabonds in law and excommunicants from the church. No hard-working, self-respecting community wanted a troupe of these rascals coming to town, setting the youngsters and servants agog with romantic notions and licentious ideas, then departing with a goodly share of the community's cash; nor did they want a theater building, which was sure to be a center for all the idlers, drunkards, pickpockets, and

prostitutes. On the other hand, the English drama was a valued part of our cultural heritage. Boston booksellers imported and advertised plays freely. The Boston *Weekly Journal* reprinted Lillo's *London Merchant* in 1732, doubtless for its excellent moral. William Goddard, the Providence printer, was not defying public opinion when he put up Shakspere's Head as his sign in 1763. Nobody seems to have objected when the Old Colony Club of Plymouth gave a reading of the Vanbrugh-Cibber *Provoked Husband* on February 8, 1770, before a company of some forty gentlemen and ladies.[1] And in 1773, when a group of Providence gentleman dared give two public performances of Otway's *Orphan* and Garrick's *Miss in her Teens*, with scenery, there were no protests in the newspapers, although there was some private indignation.[2]. The undergraduates, meanwhile, had been particularly privileged, for the colleges accepted the acting of plays as a legitimate extension of the training in public speaking. As early as 1758, the Harvard men were offering regularly the standard English plays; in 1762, the practice was formally permitted; yet thirty years later, in 1792, Joseph Harper's professional company was driven out of Massachusetts. While the records of Brown University are scanty, there is definite evidence that the undergraduates there were also performing plays without hindrance before the laws against the theater were repealed.[3]

Under such favorable circumstances, the undergraduates and their instructors were bound to try writing original plays. Their earliest efforts, however, were not imitations of the English classics but the so-called "dialogues," in which important questions could be argued out by persons

[1] *Publ. Colonial Soc. Mass.*, vol. 17, p. 342 *n.*
[2] *Rhode Island History*, vol. 4, pp. 55–8.
[3] *Rhode Island Hist. Soc. Coll.*, vol. 23, pp. 33–41.

representing the different points of view. The dialogue was a very old form: one found it in *Job*, in the *New England Primer*, in the eighteenth-century newspapers. On the Commencement programs, these dialogues or disputations alternated with the orations; and before long, there were even comic dialogues acted in costume. These were definitely not considered plays, of course; otherwise, they could never have been performed, as they were, in the Baptist Meeting House at Providence (where Brown still holds its commencements) on a stage erected before the pulpit, with a dressing-room under the balcony.

H. H. Brackenridge expressed the academic attitude towards these dialogues in the preface to his *Death of General Montgomery*, Philadelphia, 1777:

> The Author of the following Dramatic Composition, would choose to have it considered only as a school piece. For though it is written according to the prescribed rules of the Drama, with the strictest attention to the unities of time, place, and action, yet it differs materially from the greater part of those modern performances which have obtained the name of Tragedy. It is intended for the private entertainment of Gentlemen of taste, and martial enterprize, but by no means for the exhibition of the stage. The subject is not love but valour. I meddle not with any of the effeminating passions, but consecrate my muse to the great themes of patriotic virtue, bravery and heroism.

"The effeminating passions"!—There speaks a voice from the Age of Reason, when it was not considered particularly desirable that love should always triumph over all other considerations; but the voice is also that of a school-master who does not want the parents of his pupils complaining.

It was the Stamp Act which set the colonists to arguing about their rights and wrongs, and thus gave the final impetus to the appearance of the Revolutionary drama. Though its immediate source was the college dialogue, and though it showed all the influences of the times, it was nevertheless a spontaneous and original type of play, quite unlike anything ever known before.

The subject matter was contemporary history, with considerable attention to accuracy of event, though of course well larded with caricatures and atrocities. For though its purpose was propaganda, that propaganda was surprisingly broad-minded, as the academic tradition demanded a presentation of all sides of the question. King George was never ridiculed; the whole blame was laid on his ministry; and while Generals Gage and Burgoyne were fair game, and the lower ranks were credited with brutalities, the general attitude was that, with exceptions only, the British officers were Noble Opponents. After all, they belonged to the same race as the colonists. In no other literature will you find an enemy spy, involved in a shocking plot of treason, treated as a tragic hero; yet such was the case with André.

Although the purpose was propaganda, these plays were not intended for the professional stage—which vanished as war approached—but for private performance before educated audiences. They were given in college halls and schools and probably in assembly rooms, private parlors, and perhaps in taverns as well. The audiences had been specially trained at the college exercises to appreciate forensics; consequently the plays tend to be a series of set rhetorical pieces: soliloquies, debates, orations to the people, harangues to the soldiers, prayers before battle, and the like. To us, the effect is rather formal and operatic; but it was what the revolutionary audiences appreciated.

This formality was also a tradition of the classic drama, which always tended to narrate rather than enact. A knowledge of the three unities hovered in the background, but never was permitted to interfere with the accurate recording of history. Non-historical heroes and heroines had classical names. And there are constant comparisons of the heroic deeds of today with those which Plutarch celebrated.

To us today, this neoclassical formality and rhetorical

dignity make the plays seem cold; but the interior is incandescent with the problems of the hour. Mercy Warren set her *Adulateur* in "Upper Servia" (the northern colonies), and named her chief characters "Brutus" and "Cassius"; but the subject of the play is transparently Governor Hutchinson's double-dealing and the Boston Massacre; while the tragic conflict in the mind of Brutus (her own brother, James Otis) is the hard choice between fidelity to the crown and devotion to Liberty. After Lexington, such allegorical evasions were no longer necessary, and the great events of the war were dramatized almost immediately.

Then there was also the influence of the British drama, particularly of Shakspere, Otway, and sometimes Lee. The standard English theme of the conflict between love and liberty was easily adapted to the theme of personal desires against public weal. In such cases, the Age of Reason and patriotic fervor combined to condemn love. These playwrights had not the privilege of their descendants to reunite and marry the lovers when the war was over.

The play usually opened with the exciting news of some historical event; in Act I there would be an academic disputation about the principles at stake; history and set speeches alternated through the other acts; and the conclusion was usually a battle with a heroic death, a harangue to the audience, or a bit of pageantry: a public funeral, a review of troops, or an apotheosis of Washington and the Goddess of Liberty.

One of the earlier of these plays remains in manuscript in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays, at Brown University. It is entitled "Ministerial Oppression, or the Grievances of America, with the Battle of Bunker Hill." Obviously it was written after June 17, 1775, and internal evidence makes it equally obvious that it was written before the Declaration of Independence. The war is still

treated as merely factional: the cast is divided into "Provincials" and "Ministerialists"—that is, Whig and Tory. Though the Tories praise King George, the Whigs never mention him at all.

The play opens with the terrible news from Lexington; now the only choice left to the Provincials is that of Liberty or Slavery. Such is the conclusion of the academic dialogue between Generals Ward, Warren, and Putnam, lamenting the hard choice and analysing the entire situation. They concur in and supplement each other's points without much distinction of character. Warren reviews New England history from the beginning, and explains the corruption of English politics as due particularly to the ceasing of Septennial Parliaments. Putnam lists, with a lawyer's precision, the specific acts of oppression: "this black Catalogue of tyrannical Acts proves to a demonstration, a settled determin'd plan of the British Ministry to enslave America." Consequently the Philadelphia Congress has been obliged to raise an army, and has given the command to "the gallant Colonel Washington of Virginia," who is daily expected in Cambridge. Warren pays him an extended compliment.

The Ministerial side of the argument is set forth quite respectably by General Gage in Act II; it was then elaborated in the next scene, but this second presentation was crossed out. The conscience-tormented Gage, however, is a cross between Spenser's Braggadocchio and Milton's Satan; Burgoyne is a poltroon; but Howe and Pitcairn are Noble Opponents. At a council of war (an academic dispute) they decide to fight it out. As the play continues, the progress of the war is followed closely. We hear of (exaggerated) atrocities at Lexington, of Gage's broken promise to let the Provincials leave Boston after they have given up their arms, of Crown Point and Ticonderoga, of the Provincial cattle-raid on Noddle's Island; then we follow the battle of

Bunker Hill through all its stages, from the first plans of the Provincials up through Warren's death. The play ends with a eulogy of Warren and an exhortation to the audience to fight on for the victory of the United Colonies.

The main plot deals with the fatal loves of Lysander and Cassandra—the earliest pair of lovers on opposite sides in the Revolutionary drama. Lysander was infuriated by the massacre of his family at Lexington; obeying the last behest of his dying father, he plunged into the fray, where he rescued Cassandra from the lustful clutch of a Ministerial officer. Instantly the two fell in love. But she has vowed to her dying mother that she would never marry without the consent of her father, and he is a leading Boston Tory. In a highly emotional scene, she persuades the infatuated Lysander to abandon the Provincial cause so far as to go with her to Boston. Here he finds himself despised as a turncoat, particularly by Pitcairn, who crushes him in a disputation concerning love versus reason, or passion versus patriotism. "But now how fall'n! ev'n to the vilest of all vassal vileness, the despicable state of female thralldom." Meanwhile Cassandra is pursued by the licentious British officer Abercrombie. Lysander and she are married; but Abercrombie overhears their plans for the nuptial night; and by ordering Lysander's temporary arrest, is able to take his place, undetected in the darkened bridal chamber. Lysander is soon released, only to meet the ghost of his father, who denounces him, forbids the consummation of the marriage, and recalls him to Honor. He returns to the Provincial camp, where he is received coldly by Warren, hitherto his bosom friend. To redeem himself, Lysander dashes into the battle on Bunker Hill, where he kills his wife's seducer, saves Warren, is mortally wounded by Pitcairn, and dies forgiven in Warren's arms. Warren himself kills Pitcairn and is killed by Howe. Cassandra seeks out

her husband's body on the hill after the battle, goes mad, and dies also.

This grim tale was quite in the British tragic fashion. Lysander is Otway's Jaffier, the victim of the "effeminating passions" which Brackenridge avoided, while Cassandra (Otway's Monimia) is ruined according to the device in Otway's *Orphan*. The father's ghost comes straight out of *Hamlet*. (There are also obvious echoes from *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *Paradise Lost*.) His parental severity in forbidding the marriage was the authority advocated in Addison's *Cato* and Steele's *Conscious Lovers*, but condemned in Richardson's *Clarissa*. Cassandra is punished terribly for seducing the hero from his patriotic duty. At this opening stage of the war, love between Whig and Tory must end in disaster; therefore, in the conflict between Liberty and Love, the latter must be sternly sacrificed. It was no time to indulge personal emotions at the expense of the public welfare.

Although there is no name on the titlepage of the play, the author was certainly James Mitchell Varnum, as it is in his handwriting, and the name "Varnum" appears upside down in fancy capitals on the back cover. Of Varnum's career as school-teacher, lawyer, general, orator, congressman, and judge, one may read in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. He was one of the seven in the first class to graduate from Rhode Island College (now Brown University) on September 7, 1769, when the faculty and graduating class all wore homespun, in protest against the British measures. It is true that the *Providence Gazette* remarked that Mr. Varnum was "elegantly dressed," but it must have been homespun elegance, because so remarkable an exception would have been noted, and furthermore, in his graduation speech he endorsed the boycott. He was the Respondent in the forensic dispute "Whether British Ameri-

ca can under her present Circumstances consistent with good Policy effect to become an independent State?" To that question he answered "No," though admitting all the evils which a rapacious ministry was visiting upon America. Nevertheless, he claimed, their monarch was "an excellent Prince, who ever since his Accession to the Throne, has discovered the most tender Regard for his numerous Subjects"; we also had in our favor powerful advocates in Parliament, a popular and favorable clamor at home, and the influence of our merchants. But warfare would be hopeless, as we had no means to resist the naval and military forces of Britain.

The play represents Varnum's sentiments as they had altered in the six years since, particularly after the outbreak of hostilities. By that time he was a colonel; and it is worth noting that he was foremost in getting the Universalist preacher, the Reverend John Murray, as chaplain for the Rhode Island troops. It is also worth noting that he was in Providence when Otway's *Orphan* was produced, an event he certainly would not have missed.

It is doubtful if his play was ever acted, because it lacks those final strokes of the pen which would have completed it. The name of Cassandra's Tory father is left a blank space; Abercrombie's name is spelled "Albecrombie" until Act V; General Ward's name was crossed out in the list of characters, but none other was substituted.

So it is unlikely that, twenty and more years later, John Daly Burk's *Bunker Hill; or, the Death of General Warren*, could have been based on Varnum's manuscript. Yet so well had Varnum worked the formula out that the two plays are surprisingly alike. Burk's play also opens with the news from Lexington and ends with Warren's death and funeral. The main plot concerns the tragic loves of a similar pair: Abercrombie, an English officer who really sympathizes with the American cause, and Elvira, the daughter of a patriot.

Abercrombie, of course, dies on the hill, where Elvira seeks out his body and goes mad.

Burk's play, which opened at the Haymarket in Boston on February 17, 1797, was a great success, which brought the author $2000 in its run of a fortnight. I see no reason why Varnum's play, given the same opportunity for an audience, should not have been equally successful.