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GENTLEMAN JOHNNY PLAYS WAR: JOHN BURGOYNE AND *THE BLOCKADE  
OF BOSTON*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### GENTLEMAN JOHNNY PLAYS WAR: JOHN BURGOYNE AND *THE BLOCKADE OF BOSTON*

By Catherine Ann Peckinpaugh Vrtis, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes  
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre

John Burgoyne, a British general during the American Revolution, is best known for his defeat by the Continental Army at Saratoga. In addition to serving as a general, Burgoyne was a playwright. While in Boston during the blockade following the Battle of Bunker Hill Burgoyne combined his interests, writing a satire of the war. *The Blockade of Boston*, Burgoyne's play, was first presented as an afterpiece to a production of *The Busybody* on January 8, 1776 (Silverman 292).

Accounts of the performance differ in detail, but the central event is consistent: during the performance a soldier walked out on stage and announced that the rebels were

attacking a British position. The audience of British military personnel, believing the statement to be a part of the performance, stayed in their seats to enjoy the show, only to then realize their mistake a moment later and rush off in great confusion. Most of the surviving records of this event are from the view of the delighted revolutionaries, who published accounts of it in their newspapers and pamphlets, to the lasting humiliation of the men involved with the production.

I first encountered the story of Burgoyne's *Blockade of Boston* while working as a teaching assistant in an undergraduate theatre history class. The professor, Noreen Barnes, was lecturing on American theatre in the eighteenth century when she told the story of the interrupted first performance. I was intrigued by the story, and so when I wrote a paper on a disrupted performance for a historiography class, I chose to research the topic. I discovered that *The Blockade of Boston*, in addition to being a great story in its own right, could serve as a lens to examine the history of the period, opening questions of race, gender, and just what it means to be an American.

A  
**VAUDEVIL,**

Sung by the Characters at the Conclusion of a new Farce, called the  
**BOSTON BLOCKADE.**

**TRUMORE.**

**Y**E Critics, who wait for an End of the Scene,  
T' accept it with Praise or dismiss it with Spleen;  
Your Candour we ask and demand your Applause,  
If not for our Action, at least for our Cause.  
'Tis our Aim by Amusement thus cheerful and gay,  
To wile a few Hours of Winter away;  
While we rest on our Arms, call the Arts to our Aid,  
And be merry in Spite of the **BOSTON BLOCKADE.**  
CHORUS. *'Tis our Aim by Sc. Sc. Sc.*

**M A R I A.**

**Y**E Ladies, who find the Time hang on your Hands  
While thus kept in a Cage by the Enemy's Bands:  
Lend me chafe a Mate from your numerous Crew,  
Be he brave as my Soldier, as tender and true  
With such a Companion Confinement has Charms;  
Each Place is a Paradise clasp'd in his Arms.  
And only of Absence and Distance afraid,  
You'll bias the small Circle of **BOSTON BLOCKADE.**  
CHO. *With such a Sc. Sc. Sc.*

**F A N F A N.**

**Y**OUR Pardon my Mouth's one Word to intrude,  
I'm sure in my Heart you won't all tink me rude:  
Tho' in Public you scoff, I see many a Spark,  
Woud tink me a sweet pretty Girl in the Dark.  
Thus merrily runs the World on with *Fansan,*  
I eat good salt Pork and get kiss'd by white Man:  
I do Misses Business, she pleas'd and I paid,  
Egad I no tir'd of **BOSTON BLOCKADE.**  
CHO. *Thus merrily runs Sc. Sc. Sc.*

**D O O D L E.**

**Y**E barbarrell'd Lawgivers, yankish'd Prigs,  
Who are Tyrants in Custom, yet call yourselves Whigs;  
In return for the Favours you've lavish'd on me,  
May I see you all hang'd upon *Liberty Tree.*  
Mean Time take Example, decrease from Attack,  
You're as weak under Arms as I'm weak in my Back.  
In War and in Love we alike are betray'd,  
And alike are the Laughter of **BOSTON BLOCKADE.**  
CHO. *Mean Time take Sc. Sc. Sc.*

**H E A R T W R I G H T**

**C**OME round then ye Comrades of Honour and Truth,  
Experienc'd Age and high-spirited Youth;  
With Drum and with Fife make the Chorus more shrill,  
And Echo shall wait it to **WASHINGTON'S** Hill.  
All brave **BRITISH** Hearts shall beat Time while we sing,  
Due Force to our Arms, and Long Life to the **KING.**  
To the Honour of both be our Banners display'd,  
And a glorious End to the **BOSTON BLOCKADE.**

## **General Burgoyne/Gentleman Johnny**

John Burgoyne played many roles over the course of his life: general, Member of Parliament, playwright. Despite his successes in these endeavors, he is more often remembered for his failures. To make matters worse, his reputation started out in a deficit; questions of paternity tarnished his reputation even before he was born in London on February 4, 1722 (Hargrove 17). He was the only child of Captain John Burgoyne, the younger son of the baronet Sir John Burgoyne, and Ann Maria Burnestone, daughter of the wealthy London merchant Charles Burnestone (O’Conner 17). While he was legally the legitimate son of Captain Burgoyne, there were widespread suspicions that he was the son of his godfather, Robert Benson, Lord Bingley, allegations started by Lady Bingley and rendered credible by the inheritance Benson left to Burnestone (Hargrove 17).

Immediately following Benson’s death on April 9, 1731, Burnestone received ownership of two of Benson’s properties: a house in Park Prospect, Westminster and an estate in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. Captain Burgoyne’s debts were forgiven, and Burnestone received an annual sum, paid directly to her and untouchable by her husband, of four hundred pounds. Furthermore, if Benson’s heirs had not children, the balance of the Benson estate would have passed to Burgoyne—on the condition he took the name “Robert Benson” (Hargrove 17). The earliest written reference to the rumor is in a letter from Horace Walpole, whose notorious bad temper demands skeptical reading; it is also

indirectly suggested in other eighteenth and nineteenth century sources, particularly those published immediately following Burgoyne's death in 1794 (De Fonblanque 5). Burgoyne's legal status as Captain Burgoyne's heir was never in question, but the rumors marked Burgoyne as mildly disreputable before he even had the opportunity to make his own mistakes.

Captain Burgoyne was a London man about town, a rake and a gambler (Lewis 6). He lost significant money gaming and was frequently in debt (O'Conner 18). Even with the support of Benson's legacy, Captain Burgoyne, who had trained as a lawyer, was forced to take a position as a judge (O'Conner 18). This account is confirmed in the September 25, 1823 letter to Caroline Parker, the daughter of Burgoyne, from her cousin Miss Warburton, the daughter of Burgoyne's sister-in-law Lady Elizabeth Warburton (Lunt 6). "Your grandfather, I'm sorry to inform you, was one of those many fine gentlemen about town who contrive to run through their means, and finish their days in the King's Bench" (qtd. de Fonblanque 7). While Captain Burgoyne had lost too much money to leave his son in comfort, he could afford to send him to school to be educated as a member of the aristocracy.

John started at Westminster School in May of 1733, at the age of 11, where he studied under Headmaster John Nicoll. At school, Burgoyne was an indifferent student. He did not attend school in 1734, but did return in 1735 and finished in 1738 (Hargrove 18-19). His major interest was classical languages; he gained proficiency in Greek and Latin and developed his lifelong habit of quoting from both languages (Lewis 7). It was

also during his time at Westminster School that Burgoyne became friends with James Stanley Smith, later Lord Strange, the heir of the Earl of Derby (Hargrove 20).

The family was the preeminent house in Lancashire. The Earl had extensive social and political power, both in and out of Parliament (Hargrove 20). For Burgoyne, the benefits of his close friendship with the heir of such a powerful family had untold benefits. Perhaps the greatest benefit would be his introduction to Strange's sixth sister, Charlotte Stanley, with whom, in one of the great scandals of the day, he would elope in 1747 (Lewis 11-12).

Before John would elope with Charlotte, however, he first began his career in the military. The first sign that Burgoyne would follow his father into the army came in 1737, when he received an honorary appointment at the age of fifteen as the sub-brigadier of the Third Troop of Horse Guards. Honorary appointments of this type were common for young members of the aristocracy who showed promise as officers. Burgoyne was a talented horseman and proficient with the saber, as well as a minor, untitled, relatively poor aristocrat, so the military was a natural choice (Lewis 8).

On April 23, 1744, the twenty-two year old Burgoyne purchased the commission of a cornet for the First Dragoons, an elite cavalry unit. In January of 1746, likely thanks to his association with the influential heir to the Derby earldom, he was made a captain (Lewis 8). During these first years in the military, Burgoyne had considerable time to play man about town in London with Strange. They spent their time together visiting the salons, gambling halls, and theatres of the city (Lewis 8-9). Burgoyne developed a reputation for excellence in gambling and high standards in his affairs, many of which

were with actresses; he demanded that the women he dallied with be clean, well dressed, and able to converse with him. During this time Burgoyne also made a bid for the hand of Frances Poole, one of the most popular members of the aristocracy; however, she instead married the titled and wealthy Lord Palmerston, a match supported by her parents (Lewis 10).

Shortly after his failure to win Poole, Burgoyne turned his attentions to Charlotte. The sixth daughter of the Earl of Derby was the intellectual of the family, and spoke French, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, and Latin and was known for her liberal views (Lewis 11). The swiftness of Burgoyne's attachment to her is revealed in the poem he read at the bachelor dinner before the marriage of Poole and Palmerston:

'Twas mine to see each opening charm,  
     New beauties rise—new graces charm;  
         'Twas mine to feel their power;  
 Nature and moral just and pure,  
     For that has made the fruit mature  
         Since I adored the flower.

After hard conflict passion cool'd;  
     Discretion, honor, reason ruled  
         O'er the subsiding flame;  
 Till Charlotte to my vacant breast,  
     With kindred charms and virtues blest,  
         A sweet successor came. (qtd. Lewis 10-11)

Derby, Miss Stanley's father, did not approve of the relationship and pressured his daughter to choose between two approved suitors. Instead Stanley, with the help of her brother, married Burgoyne (Lewis 12). Derby initially balked at the unapproved wedding of his daughter and refused to support the young couple. As a result, in 1747 Burgoyne

was forced to sell his commission, and he and his young bride moved to France for the next seven years (de Fonblanque 9).

In 1755, as tensions were mounting between Britain and France, the Burgoynes returned to England and reconciled with Derby (Hargrove 24). War was declared in May of 1756, and Burgoyne was gazetted as a captain in the Eleventh Dragoons on July 14. Receiving a second commission was highly unusual, but not unprecedented. The Earl of Derby likely used his influence to ensure that Burgoyne was such an exception. After two years in the Eleventh, Burgoyne was promoted to Captain Lieutenant of the Coldstream Guards, which also made him a lieutenant colonel of the Foot Guards, making him eligible for regular, automatic promotion (Glover 47). In 1759 Burgoyne was appointed as the Lieutenant Colonel Commandant of the Sixteenth Light Dragoons, and on August 4, 1759 George II sent Burgoyne a “beating order” so he could begin recruitment (Glover 50-51).

Burgoyne’s recruitment offers were generous enough to draw significant attention during a time in which other recruiters still resorted to impressments. His posters ensured recruits:

You will be mounted on the finest horses in the world, with superb clothing and the richest accoutrements; your pay and privileges will be equal to two guineas per week; you will be everywhere respected; your society will be courted; you will be admired by the Fair, which, together with the chance of getting switched to a buxom widow, or of brushing with a rich heiress, renders the situation truly enviable and desirable.

Young men out of employment or uncomfortable, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune”; nick in instantly and enlist. (qtd. Lewis 24)

To ensure his officers continued the fair treatment he promised the enlisted ranks, Burgoyne issued detailed instructions on how to relate to the troops. Banned by his *Code of Instructions* were such standard practices as flogging, running the gauntlet, clubbing, and kicking with or without spurs attached to the boots. Furthermore, his officers were not to swear in front of the men under their command and were advised to tell jokes, for, according to Burgoyne, jokes would act “as an encouragement to the well-disposed and at the same time a tacit reproof to others” (qtd. Lewis 25). Also banned was “Removal to the Navy,” one of the worst possible punishments in the commander’s arsenal (Lewis 25). Burgoyne’s gentle tactics made him popular with the soldiers under his command, and earned him his nickname of “Gentleman Johnny” (O’Conner 9).

In 1762 Spain entered the war on the side of the French and invaded Portugal. King Joseph I called on his British allies to open a second front. Burgoyne and his Light Dragoons were among those sent to Lisbon (Lunt 38-39). When the Spanish attacked the fortress of Valencia de Alcántara, Burgoyne was selected to lead the counter-attack and stop their march towards the capital. Ever the gambler, he sent his outnumbered Light Dragoons into the town and successfully prevented the seizure of the fortress (Lunt 40-41). The Spanish needed time to recover, but by early October they arrived at Villa Velha, outside of Lisbon. Burgoyne again utilized the speed of his light cavalry’s horses and the element of surprise to hold off the Spanish (Lunt 42). After the Sixteenth Light Dragoons

had twice checked the progress of the invading force, the Spanish were unable to reach the city of Lisbon before the end of the campaigning season. The four countries negotiated peace that winter, signing the Peace of Paris in February of 1763; Burgoyne returned home as a popular hero of the Seven Years War (Hargrove 40).

Upon his return to England Burgoyne left active military service and changed his focus to politics. For a time his reputation was very strong. He was associated by marriage to the Earl of Derby and was regarded a hero for his role in the Portugal campaign. Capitalizing on his popularity and family ties, Burgoyne ran unopposed for a seat in the House of Commons, taking his seat as an Independent in November of 1763 (Lewis 34). His early career as a Member of Parliament was neither distinguished nor contentious. However during the summer of 1767 the Parliament was dissolved and new elections held. Burgoyne decided to run for the borough of Preston, Lancashire seat (Hargrove 49). The election was deeply divisive, and the tensions broke into rioting on the day of the election, March 21, 1768 (Hargrove 52).

Burgoyne won the election, but was charged with aiding and abetting the rioters, and was in and out of court during the spring of 1769. The case ended in a conviction. Burgoyne was not forced to serve a prison sentence, but he was fined one thousand pounds (Hargrove 53). The trial left his reputation in tatters. Many of his contemporaries believed Burgoyne should have served time in prison; one wrote "I do think they should have sent the Colonel to keep Mr. Wilkes company as well as the rest, and then every body would have been satisfied; most people think that part was wanting to make the sentence

complete” (qtd. Hargrove 53). Burgoyne continued in Parliament until leaving for America in 1775, but his good name was ruined (Hargrove 72).

Burgoyne had one major success in this period, however: his first play, *The Maid of the Oaks*. The play was written for the June 1774 wedding of Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, the daughter of the Duke of Hamilton, and Lord Stanley, Strange’s son. The first two performances—at the wedding and again five days later—were at “The Oaks,” estate in Surry. David Garrick soon heard about the play, and approached Burgoyne regarding a professional production. Burgoyne agreed; an expanded version opened at the Drury Lane Theatre on November 12, 1774, and ran for several nights. Frances Abington, who played the role of Lady Bab Lardoon, received the best reviews. Some reviewers dismissed the work completely. Walpole dismissed the show, stating “there is a new puppet show at Drury Lane, as fine as scenes can make it, called ‘The Maid of the Oaks,’ and as dull as the author could not help making it” (qtd. Hargrove 63). Despite the mix of reviews, Burgoyne’s work represented the development of a new, middle-class influenced form of musical comedy and would become a prototype of the genre (Hargrove 63-64).

Burgoyne’s play may have been to London tastes, but his views on the mounting tensions were not. No longer young, Burgoyne was still the liberal intellectual he had been as a student; as a politician he was sympathetic to the colonists’ complaints, and as an officer he was wary of fighting them. On October 3, 1774, Burgoyne gave a speech to the House of Commons, explaining: “should the American colonists rebel against the treatment accorded them by His Majesty’s Government, I, for one, would not blame them. As for myself, I can but hope I shall never be required to take the field against them, as

they would fight like men possessed by demons” (qtd. Lewis 3). Although he was sympathetic to the colonial position and disinterested in returning to war at the age of fifty-four, Burgoyne was a military man. When he received orders to return to active service in North America, he performed his duties to the best of his abilities.

Burgoyne, recently promoted to Major-General, reached the city of Boston on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1775, aboard the ship *Cerberus* (Glover 81). Despite his success as a daring leader in Portugal, Burgoyne did not demonstrate any remarkable prowess as a commander during his time in Boston. In fact, even though he was simply carrying out the orders given to him, he was almost universally mocked for having watched the Battle of Bunker Hill from a safe distance. In his 1775 letter to his friend Lord Rochfort, Burgoyne explained his failure to engage, stating, “for my part, the inferiority of my station as youngest Major-General upon the staff, left me almost a useless spectator, for my whole business lay in presiding during part of the action over a cannonade to assist the left” (qtd. de Fonblanque 145).

The Battle of Bunker Hill was a Pyrrhic victory for the British; 2,500 professional soldiers served in the battle and 1,100 of them were casualties (Glover 86). Afterward the significant losses at Bunker Hill, General Gage was unwilling to risk his few remaining soldiers in an attempt to take control of the outlying lands. Instead he consolidated his efforts in the city and maintained the blockade of the Boston harbor established after the Boston Tea Party. Boredom and isolation were not the only troubles to haunt the British in Boston. The citizens, many of whom were sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause and nearly all of whom resented the occupation of the city, systematically complicated the lives

of the British forces. Local farmers refused to sell provisions to the British, and even hid supplies rather than see them in British hands (Lewis 72). Burgoyne broke a boot heel, but could find no cobbler willing to fix it for him (Lewis 61). John Hancock, Boston's wealthiest citizen, broke with tradition and refused to invite the British officers to dinner (Lewis 61). With each small annoyance the Bostonians made it clear that the British were not welcome in their city.

Despite the harassment, Burgoyne was initially sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause. He wanted the conflict settled without bloodshed and with honor on all sides (Lewis 71). After the Battle of Bunker Hill, Burgoyne engaged in a private correspondence with Charles Lee, a commissioned Major-General in the Continental Army, discussing the possibility of a negotiated surrender (Lewis 69). The two officers exchanged several letters on the topic which Burgoyne, hoping to gain support for the plan, published in the *New York Gazette*. Major-General Lee was offended by Burgoyne's presumption and immediately cut off negotiations (Glover 88).

Burgoyne was bored and frustrated. He hated Boston, resented its citizens' treatment of him and his soldiers, and longed for a quick end to the hostilities and a swift return home. As he described to His Majesty's Attorney-General Mr. Thurlow in an August 20, 1775, letter, he had "little more than contemplation for employment, except when I am sometimes called upon to draw a pen instead of a sword" (qtd. de Fonblanque 201). It was during this time that Burgoyne and others converted Faneuil Hall into a playhouse and Burgoyne wrote his infamous satire, *The Blockade of Boston*, before returning to London during the winter of 1775 (Silverman 292). The hostility expressed in

the script, initially surprising given Burgoyne's sympathy to the Revolutionary cause, may have been an attempt to raise the morale of his soldiers, who likely as frustrated as he was by their treatment in the city. Burgoyne's tenure in Boston may have been embarrassingly insignificant, but this is not to say he did not provide notable service during the Revolutionary War. His second attempt to end the war had dramatic results, but unfortunately for Burgoyne, not the results he had planned.

In London, Burgoyne and Lord George Germain, a relative of the Duke of Dorset and the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, developed a plan to attack New England from Canada, identified in the history of the Revolution as the Saratoga campaign. Starting in Quebec, the army, led by Burgoyne, would sweep down to Albany, driving the colonists before it. A southern army, led by General William Howe, would attack from warships in the Hudson. The campaign was designed to cut off New England, ending the revolution in one stroke (O'Conner 62-63). It was not to be a success.

The plan was flawed from the start, depending on recruitment in North America to support the British army and hired Hessians. The French Canadians and their Native American allies had no interest in fighting for British interests (O'Conner 61-62). Furthermore, during the Saratoga campaign Burgoyne was distracted from his duties as a general by his personal life, when his wife died on June 5, 1776 (Lunt 109). Distracting Burgoyne even further was his mistress, who was with him on the campaign trail. The Baroness Frederika Charlotte Louise von Riedesel, wife of Hessian General Fredrich Adoph von Riedesel, reported the problem in her journal, "in fact, Burgoyne liked having a jolly time and spending half the night singing and drinking and amusing himself in the

company of the wife of the commissary, who was his mistress and, like him, loved champagne” (von Riedesel 55-56). The jolly times did not last; according to the journal of the campaign, kept by Hessian Colonel Johann Friedrich Specht, it was Burgoyne himself who, on October 13, 1777, “produced the final draft of a document of surrender, which, in the case of acceptance by the enemy, would save the whole army for the King, who then could use it for other purposes” (Specht 98).

The dependence on Canadian recruitment and the distraction of the commanding general contributed to the failure of the Saratoga campaign, but Burgoyne was not the only general at fault. The plan depended on Howe meeting Burgoyne at Albany; the two armies were to act as scissors, cutting off New England from the rest of the continent. When Howe marched his army to Philadelphia instead, the plan collapsed (O’Conner 112). No matter what caused the defeat, the failure of the Saratoga campaign gave the Northeast to the Revolutionaries, and Burgoyne was an easy scapegoat. He remained under investigation from his return on April 2, 1778, until the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781. After the end of the war, Burgoyne’s court-martial was quietly laid aside and he was granted the title of commander-in-chief of the British forces in Ireland, a position he held until his final retirement from the military in 1784 (O’Conner 114-115).

While waiting in London for court-martial hearings, Burgoyne returned to one of his favorite pastimes, the theatre. The 1807 collection of Burgoyne’s plays, *The Dramatic and Poetical Works of the Late Lieutenant General J. Burgoyne: To which is Prefixed, Memoirs of the Author*, included four plays: *The Maid of the Oaks*, *The Lord of the Manor*, *The Heiress*, and *Richard Coeur de Lion*. Only *The Maid of the Oaks* was written before

Saratoga. The first of Burgoyne's new plays, *The Lord of the Manor*, opened at Drury Lane on December 27, 1780; *The Lord of the Manor*, like the two subsequent plays, was produced under the management of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The authorship of the play was initially anonymous, but once the success of the production was clear, Burgoyne claimed responsibility (Lunt 323). The third, *Richard Coeur de Lion*, opened on October 24, 1786. The show made little impression, either positive or negative (Lunt 325). It was the second play, *The Heiress*, which cemented Burgoyne's reputation as a legitimate playwright.

The show opened on January 14, 1786, and London had been anticipating the production for months. At least one newspaper reported the upcoming play as early as November 25, 1785: "It is very privately reported in Drury Lane that *The Heiress* will soon make its appearance, and it is whispered that General Burgoyne is the author of it" (qtd. Lunt 324). When the show finally opened the audiences flocked to see it, keeping it open an impressive thirty days. Reviewers were enthusiastic; one commented "*The Heiress & General Burgoyne*, the author, may rejoice." The commentator continued on to say, "if he proceeds as he has done, advancing much beyond his *Lord of the Manor* and *Maid of the Oaks* he will rejoice not without good reason" (qtd. Lunt 324). Even Walpole was impressed, describing *The Heiress* as "the genteelest comedy in the English language" (qtd. Lunt 324).

In addition to writing plays, Burgoyne spent the last years of his life raising a family. Sometime after his return to London, Burgoyne began an affair with Susan Caulfield, an actress in her twenties. In 1780 Caulfield moved in to Burgoyne's house in

Belgravia, providing the gossips with one last scandal by “Gentleman Johnny.” Although Caulfield and Burgoyne had four children together and Caulfield inherited Burgoyne’s estate, the two never married (Lunt 325). Burgoyne continued quietly in London, raising his children and attending the theatre, until August 3, 1792, when he collapsed at a performance in the Haymarket theatre. He died the next day at the age of seventy (O’Conner 122). At the time of his death, Burgoyne was working on his most ambitious play, an operatic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Burgoyne’s public life, defined by both its exceptional highs and exceptional lows, ended quietly in a private funeral at Westminster Abbey (Lunt 327).

## The Status of Theatre in Boston

Puritan-influenced colonial Boston was actively hostile to theatrical activities, and outspoken condemnation of drama was common decades before the 1750 act legally banning the performance of plays. As explained by a letter to the *Boston Gazette* in 1732, theatre was a danger because “in vain will our Ministers preach Charity, Moderation, and Humility to an Audience, whose thoughts are engaged [*sic*] in Scenes of Splendour and Magnificence, and whose Time and Money are consumed by Dress and Dancing” (qtd. Nathans 21). Despite widespread intolerance of the theatre, individuals did occasionally risk censure and act in public performances. In 1714, for example, a play was produced in the Boston Council Chamber, drawing the ire of Chief Justice Samuel Sewall. Even the Romans with their love of spectacles, he wrote in a letter of protest, were not “so far set upon them as to turn their Senate House into a Play-House.” In disgust, he abjured “Christian Boston” not to “goe beyond Heathen Rome in the practice of Shamefull Vanities” (qtd. Daly 16).

In addition to direct criticism by community leaders, Bostonians were discouraged from the theatre by news reports of accidents in the theatre. The *Boston News Letter* carried such a story in its edition from the week of February 18, 1706. The event the

report is from Bristol on August 4, 1703; the delay of three years prior to the report reveals its propagandist intentions:

On Thursday last our players acted near this city: a comedy called *the Metamorphoses*, in which there's a song in praise of the devil.... Near the end of the play the seats gave a great crack and afterwards fell, so that the auditors were all rumbled together, and frighten'd as if there had been conjuration.... [S]everal persons were bruise'd but not killed.... The players ran out at the back-door, and there was a report that something more than ordinary appear'd, but this is false.... However several who were there look upon it as a judgement, and resolve never to go thither any more; but the players are so hardened, that they intend to act it again this evening. (qtd. Johnson and Burling 73-74)

A similar story appeared in the *Boston Gazette* on December 1, 1741:

Clonmell, Sept. 23. On Monday last was acted here the *Recruiting Officer* with the *Devil in the Wine Cellar*. As the actors began to play the devil (the farce) the lofts of the house not only fell down, but also the stage and the front seats, with 200 persons that sat thereon, several of whom had their arms and legs broke, and others were so much bruised that their lives are despair'd of. (qtd. Johnson and Burling 74).

The Boston government saw theatre as a danger to the bodies and souls of its citizens; under the circumstances it is not surprising they acted to formally ban theatre.

In 1750 the General Court legally prohibited all performances of plays. The fine was £20 for sponsorship of, or participation in, such an event, and £5 simply for being in

the audience. The reasoning behind the act expressed the same concerns as in the *Gazette* 18 years before; the act was:

for preventing and avoiding the many great mischiefs which arise from public stage plays, interludes, and other theatrical entertainments, which not only occasion great and unnecessary expense, and discourage industry and frugality, but likewise tend generally to increase immorality, impiety, and contempt of religion. (Nathans 22)

Public support for the law was expressed in anti-theatrical broadsides, such as *The Folly, Infamy, Misery of Unlawful Pleasure* in 1761 and *Another High Road to Hell* in 1768 (Saks 375-376).

While support of the 1750 act was widespread, it was by no means universal. Illegal performances, and subsequent debates on the law, occurred in 1760, 1763, 1765, and 1767 (Johnson and Burling 77). Additionally, students at Harvard started giving amateur performances in 1758 as part of their rhetorical training; formal permission for the Harvard exception was granted by the city in 1762 (Reardon 100). Despite the protests, colonial Boston never overturned its anti-theatrical law; performances were not legalized until 1793, when the General Court permitted the construction of a theatre on Federal Street (Milford 74). First, however, legal restrictions on theatre increased for the Revolutionary War. In 1774 the Continental Congress banned the “exhibitions of shews” for the duration of the fighting (Brown 24).

## ***The Blockade of Boston***

The city of Boston and the Continental Congress could ban the performance of shows, but they could not force the occupying British army to obey the bans. The British soldiers stationed in North America had been performing plays for their own amusement well before the outbreak of hostilities between the colonies and Britain. The company in Albany gave performances in 1757 and 1760, the one in Fort Cumberland in 1758, and the one in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1773. There was even a performance by a troupe of military-thespians in Boston in 1769 (Johnson and Burling 73). Furthermore, Boston was not the only occupied city to see British military theatre during the Revolutionary War. Soldiers under Howe's command gave performances in their winter quarters in New York in 1777 and in Philadelphia in 1778 (Nettleton 171). The frequency of productions by Howe's soldiers was such that they earned the nickname in the *Royal American Gazette* of "Howe's Strolling Players" (qtd. Brown 31). While the performances by British military personnel were not unprecedented, the plays in Boston during the blockade had a singular result.

During the Boston blockade, Burgoyne followed the example of past commanders and authorized a theatre (Wilmeth and Bigsby 5). Compounding the insult to the city, Burgoyne and his associates were performing in Faneuil Hall, where the Boston leaders of the Revolution, as one British captain put it, "used to hold yr Cabals" (qtd. Silverman 292).

Not happy to simply ignore the laws of occupied Boston—and in the former meetinghouse of the Revolutionary leaders, no less—Burgoyne often had handbills of his events sent to George Washington, John Hancock, and the other signers of the 1774 ban against theatre (Brown 24).

At least four plays were produced in the converted Faneuil Hall. The space was under construction until December 2, 1775 but plays were produced as early as September. Tickets cost one dollar, with profits supposedly going to the widows and orphans of soldiers, but evidence suggests little money actually went to the supposed beneficiaries. The documented performances were *The Busybody* by Susannah Centlivre, *Tamerlane* by Nicholas Rowe, a translation of Voltaire's *Zara* by Aaron Hill, and Burgoyne's *The Blockade of Boston* (Brown 24). The entertainments were as much a success with the British as they were a failure with the colonists. As Lieutenant Lord Rawdon, better known by his later title General Lord Moira, Marquis of Hastings, wrote that winter, "We are to have plays this winter in Fanteuil [*sic*] Hall. I am enrolled as an actor; not that I love sporting in public, but I do not think it right to refuse on this occasion. General Burgoyne is our Garrick: our ladies are few, but I daresay we shall produce some good actresses" (qtd. Glover 88).

*The Blockade of Boston* was first presented as an afterpiece to a performance of *The Busybody* on January 8, 1776; the first night was to be the most memorable. The play was a vicious satire of the Revolutionary Army. No complete script has survived, but contemporary accounts provide a clear indication of the tone; the diary of Dorothy Dudley, for example, recounts "General Washington . . . represented as an uncouth countryman;

dressed shabbily, with a large wig and long rusty sword” (qtd. Silverman 292). A “vaudevil” to be performed at the end of the play and published separately as a broadside confirms the contemporary characterization of the work, as can be seen from the lines of the character of Doodle:

YE tarbarrell’d Lawgivers, yankified Prigs  
 Who are Tyrants in Custom, yet call yourselves Whigs;  
 In return for the Favours you’ve lavish’d on me,  
 May I see you all hang’d upon *Liberty Tree* (Burgoyne *A Vaudevil*)

The colonists, understandably, were not thrilled to be depicted in such a light. Two weeks before the performance, the *New England Chronicle*, a Whig newspaper, reported “We are informed that there is now getting up at the Theatre, and will performed in the course of a Fortnight, a new Farce, called the Blockade of Boston. (*It is more probably, before that time, the poor wretches will be presented with a Tragedy, called the BONDBARDMENT of Boston*)” (qtd. Brown 27). While no such tragedy pre-dated the opening of *The Blockade of Boston*, on the night of January 8, 1776, the *New England Chronicle* came close to having its wish come true.

Accounts of the opening performance of Burgoyne’s *The Blockade of Boston* differ in detail, but the central event is consistent: during the performance a costumed soldier walked out on stage and announced that the rebels were attacking a British position, and the audience of British military personnel, believing the statement to be a part of the performance, stayed in their seats to enjoy the show, only to realize their mistake and rush

off in great confusion. The *Middlesex Journal* included a brief mention of the event in its January 25 issue:

We hear that the enemy, in Boston, the evening on which our troops burnt the houses at Charlestown, were entertaining themselves at the exhibition of a play, which they called the Blockade of Boston; in the midst of which a person appeared before the audience, and with great earnestness, declared that the Yankees were attacking Bunker's Hill. The deluded wretches, at first, took this to be merely *farcical*, and intended as part of their diversion. But soon convinced that the actor meant to represent solemn *reality*, the whole assembly left the house in confusion, and scampered off with great precipitation. (qtd. Moore 199)

The *Middlesex Journal* published a second account, an "extract of a genuine letter from Boston," by an unnamed "officer in the king's army" on February 27. The unnamed officer describes his participation in the skirmish at Bunker's Hill and then continues with an account of the play:

What is most extraordinary, a new farce was that night to have been acted at Boston, called The Blockade of Boston; the play was just ended and the curtain going to be drawn up for the farce, when the actors heard from without that an attack was made on the heights of Charlestown, upon which one of them came in, dressed in the character of a Yankee sergeant (which character he was to play) desired silence, and informed the audience the alarm guns were fired; that the rebels had attacked the town, and were at it

tooth and nail over at Charlestown. The audience thinking this was the opening of the new piece, clapped prodigiously; but soon finding their mistake, a general scene of confusion ensued. They immediately hurried out of the house to their alarm posts; some skipping over the orchestra, trampling on the fiddles, and every one making his most speedy retreat. The actors (who were all officers) calling out for water to wash the smut and paint from off their faces; women fainting, and in short, the whole house was nothing but one scene of confusion, terror, and tumult. (qtd. Moore 199-200)

By other contemporary accounts, the announcement made interrupting the show was “Turn out! Turn out! They are hard at it, hammer and tongs” or “The Yankees are attacking our works at Bunker Hill” (qtd. Silverman 293-294).

There is no documentation to suggest that the attack was planned by the offended citizens of Boston to disrupt Burgoyne’s satire, but the possibility occurred to at least one British lieutenant, whose account of the night included the observation, “If it was the intention of the enemy to put a stop to the farce for that night . . . they certainly succeeded, as all the officers immediately left the playhouse and joined their regiments” (qtd. Silverman 293). Despite Burgoyne’s permanent association with the event—he was both the author of *The Blockade of Boston* and the founder of the theatre—he cannot actually be blamed for the chaos; Burgoyne had left Boston on His Majesty’s Ship *Boyne* on December 5, 1775 (Glover 88).

## Pamphlet Plays

While the Continental Congress outlawed the production of shows, a redundant ban for the city of Boston, drama still played a vital role in the revolutionary action of the rebelling colonists. Pamphlet plays, designed to be read rather than performed onstage, were a popular source of political news during the war (Brown 11). Propaganda in dramatic form, pamphlet plays expressed all the urgency and irrationality of revolution; the writers did not concern themselves with balanced arguments, but instead inflamed the passions of their supporters (Philbrick 7). These pieces have received little attention as drama; in 1888 George Seilhamer declared that apart “from their politics and their personal reflections they were without merit,” and there has been little disagreement since (qtd. Strand 93). However, such a dismissal ignores the improbable dedication of the pamphleteers who insisted on presenting their ideas on revolution in an outlawed medium.

Two of the pamphlet plays written in support of revolution have an association with performed theatre in addition to medium similarity. *The Fall of British Tyranny* and *The Blockheads: Or, The Affrighted Officers* parody a failed performance: the January 8, 1776, opening of Burgoyne’s *The Blockade of Boston*. Both plays, published anonymously, present the British military leadership as incompetent and the colonists’ victory as inevitable. Burgoyne’s theatrical activities are shown as evidence of his, and by extension all of Britain’s generals’, fundamental unfitness for command. The argument is illogical on

a number of levels, not least of all in that if theatre and drama cannot mix successfully for the British, the combination should not work for the Revolutionaries—and if plays have no place in war, the pamphleteers would have been better served using a medium of propaganda not banned by an act of the Continental Congress. However, the authors of *The Fall of British Tyranny* and *The Blockheads* chose a dramatic form to condemn and mock Burgoyne's drama, making their works worthy of particular note.

Scholars have been trying to identify the author of *The Fall of British Tyranny* since the nineteenth century. In his 1855 *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time*, John F. Watson credited the play to “Joseph Lacock, Coroner” based on the report of a man who had lived in Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War, identified as J. H. J. from Cheviot, Ohio (Philbrick 41). Montrose J. Moses attempted to identify “Joseph Lacock” in his 1918 preface to his edition of the script. However, he found in the colonial records “no less than three John Leacocks mentioned, all of whom were Coroners, as well as Joseph Leacock who occupied the same position” (qtd. Philbrick 41). Another possible author of the play is a Philadelphia jeweler and silversmith named Joseph Leacock, credited by Seilhamer as the author of the 1767 opera *The Disappointment*. Whoever wrote the play, it was sufficiently popular to be printed within a single year, 1776, in Philadelphia, Boston, and Providence (Philbrick 41).

While authorship of *The Fall of British Tyranny* is hard to prove, as the pamphlet was published anonymously, it was definitively published. What cannot be determined is if it was performed before it was published, as has been asserted by Watson and Moses. According to letter from a correspondent, which Watson published in his *Annals of*

*Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time*, “It was performed by amateurs in Philadelphia in 1776” (qtd. Johnson 285). Moses does not offer insight into who would have given the production, but he asserts that in 1776 the play was “greeted by the theatre-going public” (qtd. Brown 79). A theatre going public available to see the play is possible despite the ban by the Continental Congress; Philadelphia, unlike Boston, had a pre-war theatre tradition. Also supporting Watson and Moses is Francis James Dallet; in October 1954 article in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, “John Leacock and the Fall of British Tyranny,” Dallet maintains the script “was acted before it was printed” (qtd. Brown 79).

Even if it was not performed before it was published, *The Fall of British Tyranny* did see production during the Revolutionary War. The French army chaplain Claude C. Robin recounted viewing a production at Harvard in his 1784 book *New Travels through North America: In a Series of Letters* (Brown 79). The fact that the pamphlet play, allegedly not designed for full production, was performed during the Revolutionary War complicates the place of these pieces in the history of theatre. Despite the lack of documentation on productions of the pamphlet plays, and their certain status as published propaganda, other performances may well have occurred in violation of the Continental Congress bans. After all, the emotional power would have been even greater on stage.

*The Fall of British Tyranny* was not just a generalized call for support of the rebelling forces; it was also a direct condemnation of the British military theatre. The association between the play and the performances of the British is made clear by the dedication of the piece: “to Lord Boston, and the Remnant of the Actors, Merry Andrews,

and strolling Players, in Boston, Lord Kidnapper, and the rest of the Pirates and Buccaneers, and the innumerable and never-ending Clan of Macs and Donalds upon Donalds in America” (*The Fall of British Tyranny* 59). However, even as the author scoffs at the British, subtly reminding them of the performance of *The Blockade of Boston* and the success of the British in stealing the show, he asserts his own superiority as a playwright and performer:

Wishing you abundance of entertainment in the re-acting this Tragi-Comedy, and of which I should be so proud to take a part with you, tho’ I have reason to think you would not of choice let me come within three hundred yards of your stage, lest I should rob you of your laurels, receive the clap of the whole house, and pass for a second Garrick among you, as you know I always act with applause, speak bold—point blank—off hand—and without a prompter. (*The Fall of British Tyranny* 60)

The dedication adds one final insult in its signature. The dedication is signed “Dick Rifle”; the Dickert rifle, common in the colonies, was uncommonly accurate, allowing the colonists to shoot “point blank” (Strand 7).

*The Fall of British Tyranny* is an extensive and wide ranging work, with a large cast including participants in the war ranging from unnamed soldiers, citizens, and slaves to Generals Washington, Lee, and Putnam representing the Americans and Lord Boston (General Thomas Gage) and Elbow Room (Howe) for the British (*The Fall of British Tyranny* 64). Despite the complexity of the piece, Leacock takes time in the play to further mock Burgoyne. Burgoyne appears in *The Fall of British Tyranny* as Mr. Caper, clearly referencing, and mocking, his involvement in the theatre. He is satirized directly for his

theatrical work when Mr. Caper complains “I’ve not been us’d to such fare—and not the least diversion of entertainment of any sort going forward here—I neither can nor will put up with it” (*The Fall of British Tyranny* 119). Admiral Tombstone, the play’s persona of Admiral Graves, immediately concludes “I think we’re all a parcel of damn’d boobies for coming three thousand miles upon a wild goose chase—to perish with cold—starve with hunger—get our brains knock’d out, or be hand’d for sheep-stealing and robbing hen-roosts” (*The Fall of British Tyranny* 119-120). The British, by Leacock’s depiction, are so over occupied with concerns of entertainment that they will lose the war for certain.

The image of the British as buffoons, used to great effect in *The Fall of British Tyranny*, is likewise used in the other 1776 pamphlet play answer to *The Blockade of Boston*, starting in the title of *The Blockheads*. Like *The Fall of British Tyranny*, *The Blockheads* was published anonymously. However, while authorship of *The Fall of British Tyranny* is still under dispute, most scholars accept *The Blockheads* to have been written by Mercy Otis Warren. The attribution was originally made in 1893 by Paul Leicester Ford, in his book *Some Notes towards an Essay on the Beginnings of American Dramatic Literature* (Philbrick 137). While the evidence is circumstantial, it is sufficient to be compelling.

Warren was a playwright; in 1790, during her life, a collection of her plays and poetry was published under the title *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*. She was involved in the politics of the American Revolution—both through her husband, Provisional Congress President James Warren, and in her own right—and she hated Burgoyne. The intensity of her feelings about Burgoyne is revealed in a letter to Abigail Adams, written on July 17, 1775:

As to Burgoyne I am not Master of Language sufficient to give you a true Idea of the Horrible wickedness of the Man. His designs are dark, his Dissimulation of the deepest dies, for not content with deceiving Mankind he practices deceit on God himself, by Assuming the Appearance (like Hutchinson) of great attention to Religious Worship when every action of his life is totally abhorant [*sic*] to all Ideas of true Religion, Virtue, or common Honesty. An Abandoned Infamous Gambler of Broke fortune and the worst Most detestable of the Bedford Gang who are wholly bent on Blood, tyranny [*sic*] and Spoil, and therefore the darling Favorite of our unrivalled Ruler Lord Bute. (qtd. Philbrick 139)

Given her strength of feeling, it is highly probable that Warren would write a play expressly to humiliate Burgoyne.

Warren was born on September 14, 1728, the third of thirteen children, in the Cape Cod town of Barnstable to a family already well established in New England. Her grandfather, Edward Dotey, arrived on the *Mayflower* and holds the dubious distinction of being a participant in the first New England duel (Richards 2). She received a traditional education in practical domestic care at home, as did most girls of the period, but she also received an exceptional college preparatory education. She was tutored with her brothers James and Joseph by Reverend Jonathan Russell; the boys subsequently completed degrees at Harvard (Richards 3). In going to tutoring, Warren moved between the male and female spaces of her culture, an activity she saw as her right, as is revealed in the pseudonym she used to sign her letters to Abigail Adams: Portia (Johnson 141).

Warren married on November 14, 1754 and moved to Plymouth with her new husband. In the two decades before the war, Warren raised five sons and wrote numerous poems (Richards 4-5). At the onset of revolution, Warren was able to exert considerable power in the public sphere through her poems and plays. Some scholars have suggested she was able to break through the traditional women's sphere of domestic life because of the social disruption of revolution; this may have made her work more acceptable to the men in the public domain, but it does not fully explain why she was so prolific and so successful. Her religious beliefs likely contributed to her activism. Like her Puritan forbearers, Warren believed she was selected by God for her place in life, and as such she must work to her utmost to complete her mission; that faith contributed to the passion of her wartime agitation (Richards 6-7).

Warren's most complete statement on her views of the Revolutionary War, as well as her best known work, is her 1805 book, the *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution: Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*, but she was using plays to support her Republican ideals at least thirty-two years earlier. In 1773 her play *The Adulateur*, a piece based on Joseph Addison's *Cato*, was published. *The Group* was published in 1775, and had been circulating for several months before. John Adams helped promote the play and its politics; he wrote James Warren on May 21, 1775 to request another copy: "one half of The Group is printed here, from a Copy printed in Jamaica. Pray send me a printed copy of the whole and it will be greedily reprinted here" (qtd. Johnson 141).

In addition to her direct participation in public life through the publication of her plays, Warren was a part of the planning of the war through her husband and his allies. James Warren became the President of the Provisional Congress following the death of Dr. Joseph Warren, the former holder of the position, in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Given the position of her husband, Warren was expected to host such guests as George and Martha Washington as well as older friends such as John and Abigail Adams. Warren maintained long correspondences with her political guests, making her privy to and a participant in the process of planning revolution and republic (Richards 14).

Following the war, Warren remained active in the politics of the young Republic. She was very concerned about the direction of the new nation, and believed that the principles of the revolution had been betrayed. In 1787, amid deepening divides between the emerging political parties, Warren threw her pen into the ring with the publication of an Anti-Federalist paper (Richards 17). Her outspoken criticism of the Federalist government led to her eventual disengagement in politics; Warren would not have the same status she did as an agitator for revolution again in her life. Despite her decrease in standing as a political pundit after the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787, she is remembered as a major actor in the founding of the United States long after her death on October 22, 1814 (Richards 1).

Warren was an impassioned political activist, and *The Blockheads* is as impassioned as it is funny. While she is almost certainly the author of the play, neither Warren's 1790 *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* nor her 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress and*

*Termination of the American Revolution* mention either *The Blockade of Boston* or *The Blockheads*, preventing attribution of the play with absolute authority.

Despite the ambiguity of authorship, the relationship between *The Blockheads* and *The Blockade of Boston* is explicit. The prologue of *The Blockheads* directly informs the audience of the topic of the satire:

For lack-a-day

Their Gen'ral turn'd the blockade to a play:

Poor vain poltroons—with justice we'll retort,

And call them blockheads for their idle sport. (*The Blockheads* 20)

While Burgoyne's play is a minor event in *The Fall of British Tyranny*, it is a central element of *The Blockheads*.

The dialectic of *The Blockheads* concludes that—as the British army was large, well armed, and well trained—their failure to secure Boston and their suffering during the occupation was entirely the result of their generals' stupidity. As the character of a British Soldier states at the end of Act III:

Our best generals, with a force of artillery, sufficient one would think, to storm the regions of Belzebub—the most experienced troops his Majesty has; a capital navy; yet, with all this force, our generals dare not peep over the entrenchments—are confin'd within three miles of garrison, writing and acting comedies. (*The Blockheads* 18)

The acting and writing of comedies, it seems, is part and parcel of the generals' incompetence.

Despite the fact plays could not legally be performed in the rebelling colonies starting in 1774, drama was still an important part of the political landscape. While works like Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* offered rational arguments for war, pamphlet plays fanned the emotions. Burgoyne wrote *The Blockade of Boston* to improve the morale of his men, but also to encourage them to view their adversaries as incompetent and their victories as certain. After the January 8, 1776, opening was interrupted by colonial military action, propagandists Leacock and Warren could reverse the situation, casting the British as the fools. While drama is not the only effective medium for political propaganda, the writers of *The Fall of British Tyranny* and *The Blockheads* found it to be an effective one for their purposes.

## Historical Response

When Burgoyne planned the Saratoga campaign, he wanted to be remembered as a British national hero, the man who ended the Revolutionary War. His wish came half true. Burgoyne is remembered for his singular contribution to the end of the war, but he is not remembered as a British hero. The importance of the Saratoga campaign in American independence is such that Burgoyne has received significant attention in the history of the United States. Against the surrender of the army of the Northeast, the disrupted performance of *The Blockade of Boston* is a minor event. Still, the event is discussed in a significant portion of the biographies of Burgoyne; the treatment of the play changes significantly in the hundred years from Edward Barrington De Fonblanque's 1876 biography *Political and Military Episodes in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century: Derived from the Life and Correspondence of The Right Hon. John Burgoyne, General, Statesman, Dramatist*.

De Fonblanque's treatment of Burgoyne is deeply sympathetic: "all men had listened when he was accused," De Fonblanque argues, "only his friends cared to hear him exonerated" (de Fonblanque 2). The reason for this gentleness in approach is stated in his preface, written in London in December 1875: "The daughters of the late Field-Marshal Sir John Burgoyne entrusted me with the duty of preparing a biography of their grandfather from such letters and documents, many of them of a very fragmentary nature,

as had been preserved in the family” (de Fonblanque viii). The biography was commissioned by Burgoyne’s granddaughters, and as such needed to conform to their understanding of their grandfather.

De Fonblanque does not discuss *The Blockade of Boston*, perhaps because the incident was humiliating for the British and so not something Burgoyne’s granddaughter cared to remember. However, De Fonblanque does mention the fact that performances were given in Boston under the auspices of Burgoyne; in De Fonblanque’s telling “in the midst of his more serious duties, Burgoyne found time to contribute to the social resources of Boston,” ignoring the fact that Boston did not want plays performed (de Fonblanque 188). De Fonblanque further spins Burgoyne’s Boston theatrical activities, arguing that the prologue and epilogue of the September performance of *Zara* “good-humouredly ridicules the prudery and Puritan severity of the Bostonians” rather than viciously mocking them (de Fonblanque 188). While De Fonblanque’s work remains one of the most significant resources to historians studying Burgoyne, later scholars did not maintain De Fonblanque’s diffident tone.

In 1969 Richard O’Conner published *John Burgoyne: Gentleman and General*, one of the first in the next decade’s flurry of scholarship on Burgoyne. The book addresses the question “could one man be both a successful British general, with thousands of men under his command, and a ‘macaroni,’ who wrote humorous plays on the side?” (O’Conner 8). While O’Conner is sympathetic to Burgoyne, noting “he was the first prominent British officer to insist that his troopers be treated like human beings,” his treatment of the general suggests that one cannot be a gentleman intellectual and maintain an empire (O’Conner

122). Ironically, while O’Conner discusses Burgoyne’s London performances, he does not mention the performances in Boston, much less the interrupted opening of *The Blockade of Boston*. Instead he merely notes “there were those who believed if he had stuck to writing plays his country might not have lost the crown jewel of her colonies” (O’Conner 117).

Paul Lewis, writing four years after O’Conner, 1973, does discuss *The Blockade of Boston*; his treatment of the play is entirely negative, as his treatment of Burgoyne in general. The title, *The Man Who Lost America*, clearly prepares the reader for Lewis’ perspective. “Reduced to making token visits of the sentry outposts, soldier Burgoyne was bored by his existence,” Lewis explains, “so playwright Burgoyne came to his rescue” (Lewis 72). However, according to Lewis “*The Siege of Boston* is so crude, so sloppily conceived, so badly written that it is difficult to believe the playwright was the same man who wrote *The Maid of the Oaks* and other plays vastly superior to it that were penned in the years after the American Revolution” (Lewis 73). The bias against Burgoyne in Lewis’ critique of *The Blockade of Boston* is profound; no script survives, so Lewis cannot possibly be giving an informed review.

While Lewis uses the play as an example of Burgoyne’s failure to achieve anything, literary or military, in Boston, he does not discuss the call to battle which disrupted opening night. Instead, he describes a far more peaceful scene:

The residents of occupied Boston snubbed the Redcoats, so only British audiences attended the play’s three performances, but they were so enthusiastic in expressing their approval that the author sent a letter and a copy of the script to David Garrick, suggesting a possible London production. (Lewis 73)

Like O'Conner, Lewis implies that a man cannot be both general and playwright, but like O'Conner he does not cite the humiliation of the British at the opening of the *Blockade of Boston* to support his position.

James Lunt's 1975 biography *John Burgoyne of Saratoga* is more balanced than *The Man Who Lost America*. Like O'Conner, Lunt recognizes Burgoyne as a complex individual. Lunt describes Burgoyne as "talented, ambitious, brave, and gifted with both political and strategic insight" but also as "an ambitious man, bent on military glory, who had fallen behind in the race because of his voluntary exile at a critical stage in his army career" (Lunt 331). Further, Lunt notes Burgoyne "was fully prepared to intrigue for preferment and freely used his 'interest' to obtain places he coveted" (Lunt 331). *The Blockade of Boston* is an insignificant part of Lunt's military focused biography; he only observes that "Burgoyne's pen was kept busy in Boston. He wrote a farce called *The Blockade of Boston*, and the prologue to a performance of *Zara*, acted by the officers of the garrison" (Lunt 89). The battle fought opening night, which so amused colonial reporters and playwrights, is unmentioned.

In 1976 the chaos of the opening night is discussed in Michael Glover's *General Burgoyne in Canada and America*, but the treatment is still sympathetic. Glover's book represents a shift in thinking about Burgoyne, as revealed in the subtitle *Scapegoat for a System*. Glover argues Burgoyne always acted appropriately in his execution of the war, and that he was unfairly blamed for the institutional failures. As such, the memorable disruption of the performance is not evidence of Burgoyne's failures, but simply an

interesting story, made even more irrelevant to the main history of the blockade by the fact “the siege had not begun in earnest”; the entire incident was a sidebar (Glover 88).

Richard J. Hargrove, Jr. shifts back to a far more critical portrayal of Burgoyne in his 1983 book *General John Burgoyne*. Like Glover, Hargrove discusses the interruption of the opening performance of *The Blockade of Boston*, but, unlike Glover, Hargrove uses the event of evidence of Burgoyne’s failures. Hargrove notes that the messenger was initially mistaken for a performer and applauded, but he inaccurately states that “the audience applauded and remained seated until the play ended” (Hargrove 82). Hargrove also mentions the mocking response plays by revolutionary sympathizers, unlike the earlier historians, but he inaccurately credits both *The Blockheads* and *The Fall of British Tyranny* to Mercy Otis Warren (Hargrove 82).

In the course of a hundred and seven years between De Fonblanque’s near hagiography to Hargrove’s critical biography, treatments of Burgoyne, and of his *Blockade of Boston*, have varied widely. De Fonblanque and O’Conner, despite the deep differences in their views of Burgoyne, share an approach in that neither even mentions the show. Lewis, who has a clear bias against Burgoyne, and Lunt, with his more balanced approach, both discuss Burgoyne’s theatre work in Boston and the *Blockade of Boston*, but they do not treat the opening night disruption. Finally, Glover and Hargrove both examine the battle on January 8, 1776; however, Glover includes the story as an odd anecdote about the general, an interesting aside to his traditional military history, while Hargrove uses the disruption, and the contemporary response plays, as evidence in his condemnation of Burgoyne. While *The Blockade of Boston* is not as significant an event in the

Revolutionary War as the surrender at Saratoga, the treatment of the play by Burgoyne's biographers can provide significant insight into their perspectives on the general and his conduct in war.

## Gender and Depictions of War

Traditionally, writing about war, like participating in battle, is a gendered activity. Discourse on politics and warfare is part of the public marketplace, space that in the eighteenth century was definitively male. However, Warren claimed a position in the male dominated dialogue with her political theories and propaganda plays; *The Blockheads* was neither Warren's first nor last venture into the public debate, but the play was a direct response to Burgoyne, who as both a gentleman and a general occupied an accepted space in the political arena. In writing *The Blockheads* Warren makes a self-conscious statement on the gendered nature of political discussion, alluding to and challenging all of the cultural baggage on the subject.

Prior to the rapid increase in tension between Britain and the colonies in the 1770s, Warren wrote in accepted female forms, such as private letters and poetry, before moving into the masculine territory of political satire and history during the war (Nicolay 83). The Revolution disrupted traditional social roles in manners similar to the changes in employment during World War II. The social turmoil caused by the conflict made it easier for Warren to gain status as a political writer (Schloesser 83). However, she was not completely comfortable making the transition. On January 3, 1775 Warren wrote to John Adams:

But though from the particular Circumstances of our unhappy time, a little personal Acrimony might be justifiable in your Sex, must not the female Character suffer. (And will she be not suspected as deficient in the most amiable part thereof, that Candour and charity which ensures her both Affection and Esteem,) if she indulges her pen to pain in the darkest shades, even those whose Vice and Venality have rendered contemptible. ( qtd. Nicolay 46)

While Warren demanded a space to speak on politics, she was not always or immediately comfortable as a satirist. However, she quickly established both her authority and comfort as a major writer on the Revolutionary War through the persona of the Republican mother.

Republicanism and the character of the Republican mother empowered women in two major ways. First, criticism of women speaking and writing in a public forum was diminished due to the status of the writing as part of the revolutionary cause. Second, emphasis on private virtue as fundamental to the Patriot cause increased the status of women, the traditional transmitters of morality (Nicolay 63). However, the authority granted by this ideology also circumscribed women's public authority by limiting it to a single topic and method of discourse.

Despite the fundamental limitations of the Republican mother model of social authority, Warren embraced it in her writings. Her 1776 poem "To Fidelio, Long Absent on the Great Public Cause, which agitated all America, in 1776" argues for women to support their men whole-heartedly in wartime, and to willingly let them go to fight or die (Nicolay 38). Argument for encouragement from home rather than engagement on the front lines of battle, or even in the Legislative bodies, fit into the charity and service model

of female patriotism, relating it back to the domestic sphere and rendering it non-threatening to the men in power (Nicolay 41).

Warren maintained clear gender roles in her agitation for revolution; like her friend Abigail Adams, Warren wanted lawmakers to “Remember the Ladies [*sic*],” not to change her society beyond recognition (Schloesser 121). However, while she recognized differences in position between the sexes, Warren also claimed equality in value. “Warren’s republican theory held the Christian virtues of charity, benevolence, compassion, and submission,” traditional feminine virtues, “as equally important as the classical ‘manly’ virtues of intelligence, military bravery, honor, and self-sacrifice” (Schloesser 87). She also challenged the views of her contemporaries, such as Lord Chesterfield, on the gendered nature of vice; she maintained men and women could both “reach the same degree of perfection or sink to the same stages of pravity which so often stamp the disgrace on the human form” (qtd. Schloesser 89). Female patriotism may have been limited by the role of the Republican mother, but Warren did not concede that limitation marked a difference in the import of the position.

Even during the American Revolution, when social disruption loosened traditional gender roles, few women achieved Warren’s status as a political commentator. However, as a public figure, Warren provides insight into the private lives of women living in the colonies during the conflict with Britain. While *The Blockheads* alone did not lead to her status, it was a part of her public action in challenging limited gender roles, even within the gender described role of the proud supporter of men in battle. Warren successfully

challenged Burgoyne in the public sphere; as a result, both of their work has a place in the study of gender in the Revolutionary War.

## Race and Sexuality

The main script of Burgoyne's *Blockade of Boston* has been lost, making most analysis of the play impossible. However, the "vaudevil," printed separately as a broadside, has survived, and in its one page provides valuable information as to the tone of the production and the prejudices at work. Of the five characters in the script, four are supporters of the British; only Doodle supports the Revolution. Heartwright is a British soldier; he addresses "ye Comrades of Honour and Truth" (Burgoyne *A Vaudevil*). Trumore is either another British soldier or a local sympathizer. Either way, he is a participant in the performances at Faneuil Hall. Both Burgoyne and Trumore "call Arts to our Aid" so they can "be merry in Spite of the Boston Blockade" (Burgoyne *A Vaudevil*). Maria is almost certainly a local Bostonian woman; the British soldiers' lovers in Britain would likely have remained there during the men's time in Boston. Maria supports the British and enjoys their company, noting "With such a Companion Confinement has Charms" (Burgoyne *A Vaudevil*).

Perhaps the most intriguing character is that of Fanfan, a minority woman, possibly a slave. Her brief lines suggest a condemnation of race relations in the colonies and of the hypocrisy of the revolutionaries fighting in the name of freedom:

YOUR Pardon my Massas one Word to intrude,  
I'm sure in my Heart you won't all think me rude:

Tho' in Public you scoff, I see many a Spark,  
 Would tink me a sweet pretty Girl in the Dark.  
 Thus merily runs the World on with *Fanfan*,  
 I eat good salt Pork and get kiss'd by white Man:  
 I do Misses Businels, the pleas'd and I paid,  
 Egad I no tir'd of Boston Blockade. (*Burgoyne A Vaudevil*)

That she is “no tir'd of Boston Blockade” suggests her life under British occupation is better than her life under the rule to the Bostonians, questioning the rebellious colonists' commitment to justice.

Fanfan is likely a victim of the exploitive labor system of slavery—it is during the Boston Blockade when she is paid, apparently in contrast to her usual situation—but she may also be a victim of sexual violence: she gets kissed, rather than kisses. If she is a slave, sexual exploitation would be easy. As Sharon Block explains in her 2006 book *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*:

By translating authority over a woman's labor into opportunities for sexual coercion, economic mastery created sexual mastery, allowing masters to manipulate forced sexual encounters into a mimicry of consensual ones. Servants and slaves could not only be forced *to* consent, but this force was also refigured *as* consent. (Block 68).

Fanfan is economically and socially disempowered during the day by the labor system and by the awareness of racial difference which allows white men to scoff at her, and is sexually disempowered at night by the same white men.

Like Fanfan, Maria is presented as having a sexual relationship. However, as a white woman Maria would have had greater power to consent or refuse to relations with white men. Reflecting Maria's greater power in the racially divided society, Maria's lines show her as a participant in relationship, rather than passive (or resisting) object of men's desires:

Ye Ladies, who find the Time hang on your Hands

While thus kept in a Cage by the Enemy's Bands:

Like me chuse a Mate from your numerous Crew,

Be he brave as my Soldier, as tender and true

With such a Companion Confinement has Charms:

Each Place is a Paradise clasp'd in his Arms.

And only of Absence and Difiance afraid,

You'll bless the small Circle of Boston Blockade. (*Burgoyne A Vaudevil*)

Maria choose her soldier and is afraid of his absence. She is an active and willing participant in a sexual relationship. By virtue of her race, Maria's experience of white men is very different than that of Fanfan. Maria wants the blockade to continue so she can continue in her dalliance; Fanfan wants the blockade to continue so she will not be exploited.

Despite the simplicity and briefness of Fanfan's lines, her speech suggests the inequalities of the colonial system and the condemnation of those inequalities by Burgoyne. However, his condemnation is ironic: his salary in Parliament and as a general was paid in part by money from the colonies. Likewise, Maria's lines suggest significant

difference in sexual power based on race. Their simple words are a microcosm of transatlantic race and class relations; even the brief surviving fragment of *The Blockade of Boston* speaks to the political complexity of its time.

## **American Theatre**

“American theatre” is an ambiguous designation. In common use in the field of theatre history it refers to theatre produced by European colonizers and their descendents using European languages; regrettably, there is little documentation available on practices prior to colonization. Furthermore, “American” is used as a descriptor of a citizen of the United States of America; American theatre can also be the theatre of the United States. This definition is also ambiguous. Determining what constitutes theatre of the United States is not easy, particularly in the liminal space of revolution.

The original thirteen states of the United States started out as British colonies. After the Revolutionary War, the states were nearly independent countries, linked together in a loose confederation. Only after the Federalists succeeded in gaining popular support for the ideology of centralized power and the Anti-Federalists succeeded in requiring a basic Bill of Rights was the Constitution signed, forming the United States of America. Prior to 1787, then, American theatre could not have existed.

Burgoyne’s work, however, does not even easily fit into the designation of “colonial theatre.” Burgoyne was not a resident of the colonies, though he did live in Boston for seven months, and spent over a year in Canada and New York. He was in the colonies as part of an occupying force under the orders of the British king in order to control the rebelling territories. Furthermore, the time he spent on the North American

continent was after the collapse of the established colonial system, but prior to the establishment of a new government: the Revolution. Burgoyne's work in America, then, is best described as "British military theatre," an awkward category in the history of theatre in North America.

Jared Brown does use the designation of British military theatre in his 1995 study *The Theatre in America during the Revolution*. As Brown observes, when the British military arrived to police the rebellious colonies, they "brought with them an appreciation of drama and a tradition of theatergoing" (Brown 7). Bored and isolated, the officers "made certain that the tradition would remain unbroken during the Revolution by presenting an ambitious series of plays in the cities they occupied" (Brown 7). Brown approaches these works as a distinct category, separate from works by the Revolutionary Army and civilians in the colonies. His work treats the limited time period of the American Revolution, and so Brown does not need to address the question of how theatre of the Revolutionary War fits into designations of colonial or American drama. The approach of discussing British military theatre extensively and in isolation is highly effective for this limited period, but is very difficult in a longer study with more limited space.

Volume One of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* has far less space to discuss the drama produced by the British military; this volume:

Deals with the colonial inceptions of American theatre through the post-Civil War period: the European antecedents, the New World influences of the French and

Spanish colonists, and the development of uniquely American traditions in tandem with the emergence of national identity. (Wilmeth and Bigsby i)

British theatre, even when performed in the territory which would become the United States, does not fit into this mission.

Despite the fact British military drama does not have a clearly defined place in the mission of the work, Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby include a brief discussion of British military theatre in the introduction to their 1998 volume of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*:

The British, meanwhile, determined that if the Congress could close theatres, they could open them. General Burgoyne, himself an amateur actor and playwright, sanctioned theatrical performances in Boston's Faneuil Hall during the Revolution. Others followed in New York, where the manager of the company was Dr. Beaumont, surgeon general of the British Forces, and Major Williams of the artillery played the tragic heroes and his mistress the heroines. (Wilmeth and Bigsby 5)

Supposedly, the British military theatre would have had no analog in the Revolutionary Army, but while the Continental Congress had banned theatre, "this did not, however, prevent George Washington from patronizing the theatre, or various colonies—most notably Maryland—from continuing to enjoy plays" (Wilmeth and Bigsby 5). Therefore, "theatre thus became the arena for a battle otherwise fought in the streets and fields," giving it a place in the Wilmeth and Bigsby study (Wilmeth and Bigsby 5).

While the treatment of British military drama in Volume One of *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* is minimal, the plays of Warren receive considerable attention. In addition to *The Blockheads*, Wilmeth and Bigsby discuss *The Adulateur*, *The Defeat*, *The Group*, *The Sack of Rome*, and *The Ladies of Castille* as definite works by Warren, and *The Motley Assembly* is mentioned as a possible Warren play (Wilmeth and Bigsby 238-239). *The Blockheads* is discussed in context of Warren's other work, not in connection to Burgoyne's play; Warren has a definite place in American theatre history, but Burgoyne's is less clear (Wilmeth and Bigsby 239).

Like Wilmeth and Bigsby, Odai Johnson discusses Warren, not Burgoyne. The 2006 book, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre*, examines "theatre's permanence, within the material marketplace, within the cultural imagination, and most potently, in the memory of colonial America" (Johnson 11). The theatre of the occupying British military is not a part of this permanence; they were guests, visiting briefly before moving on and taking their performances with them. Warren, however, is an important element of the permanence of colonial drama. Her family had been in the colonies for generations, she was an active member of the political life of Massachusetts, and she wrote plays over a period of decades.

Burgoyne is mentioned briefly in Johnson's study, but only in association with Warren. Johnson credits Warren with great significance in the history of American theatre; according to him, she is "a unique contribution to the history of the stage, certainly the first woman playwright in America, all the more so being a Bostonian and one engaged in rehearsing the Revolution" (Johnson 142). Burgoyne does not receive the same attention

in Johnson's work. *The Blockade of Boston* is mentioned as the inspiration for *The Blockheads*, but Burgoyne is not mentioned in any other context.

Even *The Blockheads* receives little attention in this work. Johnson is interested in Warren's self-conscious status as a playwright, including her use of the name Portia in her letters to Abigail Adams, and in the relation of her work to the marketplace, as revealed in the active promotion of her work by John Adams and the printing of *The Group* in Jamaica (Johnson 141). While Johnson's study, like Brown's, is limited to drama of the American colonies of the British Empire before and during the Revolutionary War, the focus of his study precludes treatment of the British military theatre which Brown discussed in his study.

The British military performed plays in the territories which now make up the United States of America. They did so during the revolution which transferred power of government from London to North America. However, these performances are not necessarily part of "American theatre." Johnson's study of the tradition of American theatre does not leave space for plays performed by outsiders, even if the productions were within the time and space of American history. Wilmeth and Bigsby fit the productions of the British military into the introduction of their study of American theatre history, not into the main volume. Brown's approach is the most inclusive, but even he treats British military drama as isolated from other contemporary performances. Burgoyne, a playwright whose American corpus was written exclusively for British military performances, fits into the theatre history canon in equally an awkward manner, sometimes only as a side note to the main story about Warren, an unquestioned American dramatist. While Burgoyne's

place in British theatre history is secure, his status in the history of American theatre is far more ambiguous.

## Conclusion

Burgoyne was a minor aristocrat and a fun loving dilettante. He played at being a soldier, a Member of Parliament, and a playwright. In each of these roles, he is remembered for his dramatic failures at least as much as his dramatic successes. *The Blockade of Boston* was memorable, and a failure, in two fields. While the script has not survived, judging from the broadside alone suggests *The Blockade of Boston* was not Burgoyne's finest play. Not only was the piece not a success in the theatre, but the opening night of the performance, January 8, 1776, was also a military failure. The British officers performing the play mistook a call to arms as part of the performance. While Burgoyne was not present, as the playwright and the general who led the failed Saratoga campaign, he is forever associated with the event.

At first glance, the lost play and the opening night disruption make for an entertaining story, a minor diversion in the more important history of warfare. Certainly the play was meant to be a minor diversion within the more important activity of conducting a war. However, the event can serve as a lens to see into the history of Burgoyne, the enigmatic general with the terrible reputation, the historiography of Burgoyne and the biases of his biographers, the history of theatre in Boston and the status of pamphlet plays, and into the categories of gender, race, and residence during the Revolutionary War. When *The Blockade of Boston* is brought to center stage, instead of

exiled to the marginalia, the scholar can find new insight into this important and tumultuous period in American history.

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