

MERCY OTIS WARREN

THE GROUP

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The Group / A Farce:

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MRS. MERCY WARREN

(1728-1814)

Most of the literature—orations as well as broadsides—created in America under the heat of the Revolution, was of a strictly satirical character. Most of the Revolutionary ballads sung at the time were bitter with hatred against the Loyalist. When the conflict actually was in progress, the theatres that regaled the Colonists were closed, and an order from the Continental Congress declared that theatre-going was an amusement from which all patriotic people should abstain. These orders or resolutions were dated October 12, 1778, and October 16. (Seilhamer, ii, 51.) The playhouses were no sooner closed, however—much to the regret of Washington—than their doors were thrown wide open by the British troops stationed in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. A complete history of the American stage has to deal with Howe's players, Clinton's players, and Burgoyne's players.

Of all these Red-Coat Thespians, two demand our attention

—one, Major André, a gay, talented actor; the other, General Burgoyne, whose pride was as much concerned with playwriting as with generalship. The latter dipped his pen in the satirical inkpot, and wrote a farce, "The Blockade of Boston." It was this play that drew forth from a woman, an American playwright, the retort stinging. This lady was Mrs. Mercy Warren¹ who, although distinguished for being a sister of James Otis, and the wife of General James Warren, was in her own name a most important and distinct literary figure during the Revolution.

So few women appear in the early history of American Drama that it is well here to mention Mrs. Charlotte Ramsay Lennox (1720-1804) and Mrs. Susanna Rowson (1762-1824). The former has the reputation of being the first woman, born in America, to have written a play, "The Sister" (1769). The author moved to London when she was fifteen, and there it was her piece was produced, with an epilogue by Oliver Goldsmith. She is referred to in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

Of Susanna Rowson, whose *Memoir* has been issued by Rev. Elias Nason, we know that, as a singer and actress, she created sufficient reputation in London to attract the attention of Wignell, the comedian. (*Clapp. Boston Stage*. 1853, p. 41.)

With her husband, she came to this country in 1793, and, apart from her professional duties on the stage, wrote a farce, "Volunteers" (1795), dealing with the Whiskey Insurrection in

¹ Mrs. Warren was born at Barnstable, Mass., September 25, 1728, and died at Plymouth, Mass., October 19, 1814.

Pennsylvania, "The Female Patriot" (1794), "Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom" (1794), and "Americans in England" (1796). All of these were produced. Her literary attainments were wide, her most popular novel being "Charlotte Temple, a Tale of Truth" (1790). She likewise compiled many educational works. (See Wegelin.)

The picture conjured up in our mind of Mrs. Warren is farthest away from satire. To judge by the costume she wore when she sat to Copley for her portrait, she must have been graced with all the feminine wiles of the period. Behold Mrs. Mercy Warren, satirist, as the records describe her:

Her head-dress is of white lace, trimmed with white satin ribbons. Her robe is of dark-green satin, with a pompadour waist, trimmed with point lace. There is a full plait at the back, hanging from the shoulders, and her sleeves are also of point lace. White illusion, trimmed with point lace, and fastened with a white satin bow, covers her neck. The front of the skirt and of the sleeves are elaborately trimmed with puffings of satin.

But however agreeable this picture may be, Mrs. Warren, on reading Burgoyne's farce, immediately sharpened her pen, and replied by writing a counter-farce, which she called "The Blockheads; or, the Affrighted Officers."² It was in the prologue to this play that the poet-dramatist wrote:

² The/Blockheads;/or, the/Affrighted Officers. /A/Farce. /Boston:/ Printed in Queen-Street,/M,DCC,LXXVI./

Your pardon first I crave for this intrusion.
The topic's such it looks like a delusion;
And next your candour, for I swear and vow,
Such an attempt I never made till now.
But constant laughing at the Desp'rate fate,
The bastard sons of Mars endur'd of late,
Induc'd me thus to minute down the notion,
Which put my risibles in such commotion.
By yankees frightened too! oh, dire to say!
Why yankees sure at red-coats faint away!
Oh, yes—They thought so too—for lack-a-day,
Their gen'ral turned the *blockade* to a play:
Poor vain poltroons—with justice we'll retort,
And call them *blockheads* for their idle sport.

Unfortunately, we cannot test the comparative value of satire as used by Burgoyne and Mrs. Warren, because the Burgoyne play is not in existence. But, undoubtedly, our Revolutionary enthusiast knew how to wield her pen in anger, and she reflects all of the bitter spirit of the time. Not only is this apparent in "The Blockheads," but likewise in "The Group," a piece which holds up to ridicule a number of people well known to the Boston of that day.

Mrs. Warren was the writer of many plays, as well as being noted for her "History of the American Revolution" (1805), and for her slim volume of poems (1790), which follow the conventional sentiments of the conventionally sentimental

English poetry of that time.

In "The Group" we obtain her interesting impressions, in dramatic form, of North and Gage and, from the standpoint of the library, we regard with reverence the little copy of the play printed on the day before the battle of Lexington—a slim brochure, aimed effectively at Tory politicians.³

In fact, mention the name Tory to Mrs. Warren, and her wit was ever ready to sharpen its shafts against British life in America. That is probably why so many believe she wrote "The Motley Assembly," a farce, though some there be who claim that its authorship belongs to J. M. Sewall. Dr. F. W. Atkinson asserts that this was the first American play to have in it only American characters.⁴

The satirical farce was a popular dramatic form of the time. Mrs. Warren was particularly effective in wielding such a polemic note, for instance, when she deals with the Boston Massacre in her Tragedy, "The Adulateur" (Boston: Printed and sold at the New Printing-Office, /Near Concert-Hall./ M,DCC,LXXIII./). On the King's side, however, the writers were just as effective. Such an example is seen in "The Battle

³ On the title-page of the Boston edition there appears the following proem: "As the great business of the polite world is the eager pursuit of amusement, and as the Public diversions of the season have been interrupted by the hostile parade in the capital; the exhibition of a new farce may not be unentertaining."

⁴ The /Motley /Assembly, /A /Farce. /Published /For the /Entertainment /of the /Curious. /Boston: /Printed and Sold by Nathaniel Coverly, in /Newbury-Street, / M,DCC,LXXIX./

of Brooklyn, A farce of Two Acts: as it was performed at Long-Island, on Tuesday, the 27th of August, 1776, By the Representatives of the Tyrants of America, Assembled at Philadelphia" (Edinburgh: Printed in the Year M.DCC. LXXVII.), in which the British ridicule all that is Continental, even Washington. This farce was reprinted in Brooklyn, 1873.

Jonathan Mitchell Sewall's (1748-1808) "A Cure for the Spleen; or, Amusement for a Winter's Evening" (1775) was another Tory protest, which carried the following pretentious subtitle: "Being the substance of a conversation on the Times, over a friendly tankard and pipe, between Sharp, a country Parson; Bumper, a country Justice; Fillpot, an inn-keeper; Graveairs, a Deacon; Trim, a Barber; Brim, a Quaker; Puff, a late Representative. Taken in short-hand by Roger de Coverly."

Mrs. Warren was the intimate friend of many interesting people. It concerns us, however, that her most significant correspondence of a literary nature was carried on with John Adams, afterwards President of the United States. This friendship remained unbroken until such time as Mrs. Warren found it necessary to picture Adams in her History of the Revolution; when he objected to the portraiture.

The student of history is beholden to Mr. Adams for many of those intimate little sketches of Revolutionary and early national life in America, without which our impressions would be much the poorer. His admiration for Mrs. Warren was great, and even in his correspondence with her husband, James Warren, he never

allowed an opportunity to slip for alluding to her work as a literary force in the life of the time. I note, for example, a letter he wrote on December 22, 1773, suggesting a theme which would "become" Mrs. Warren's pen, "which has no equal that I know of in this country."

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