

# Old Stories, New Readings



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## *The Transforming Power of American Drama*

Edited by

Miriam López-Rodríguez,  
Inmaculada Pineda-Hernández  
and Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz

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# INTRODUCTION

MIRIAM LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ  
AND INMACULADA PINEDA-HERNÁNDEZ  
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Whether imaginary or based on real events, stories are at the core of any culture. Regardless of their length, their rhetoric strategies or their style, humans tell stories to each other to express their innermost fears and needs, to establish a point within an argument or to engage their listeners in a fabricated composition. Stories can also serve other purposes, such as being used for entertainment, for education or for the preservation of certain cultural traits. Storytelling is at the heart of human interaction, and as such, it can foster a dialogic narrative between the person creating the story and their audience. In literature, this dialogue has been traditionally associated with narrative in general and with the novel in particular, however, other genres also make use of storytelling. Drama is one of them.

The current volume explores the ways in which American theatre from all ages deals with this: how stories are told onstage, what kinds of stories are recorded in dramatic texts, and how previously neglected realities have gained attention through the American playwright's telling or retelling of an event, or action.

Stories may be classified in different ways: one of them is the narratological categorization of "big" vs. "small" stories. According to Mark Freeman, "there has been an increasing emphasis in narrative inquiry on 'small' stories (i.e., those derived from everyday social exchanges) rather than 'big' stories" (those that imply an individual's reflection on either a specific situation, a whole life, or a portion of it) (155). The stories unfolded in American drama follow recent narratology theories particularly in the sense that there is a greater incidence of those so-called small stories over big stories. This can be explained by the immediacy of the dramatic text with its potential double impact, both on the textual level and on the performative level. When presented onstage these stories become vivid displays of ordinary social interaction (small stories), rather than the more complex and lengthy renderings of vital episodes (big stories). The immediacy and perishability of the dramatic

performance thus conditions this narrative tendency. Despite the increase in the production of this type of texts and the growing interest in them in the field of narratology, small stories are literary episodes that have been granted less critical attention, expressly in Drama Analysis. This is why the present volume comes to fill a void in the study of the stories presented on the American stage.

Hugo Bowles, in his groundbreaking *Storytelling and Drama* (2010), subdivides small stories into: the recalling of memories, the unfolding of anecdotes, the unveiling of secrets and the description of dreams. The essays collected in the present book focus on one or more of those categories in a wide range of US dramatic texts, from Native American performances, through musical plays, to canonical or even unconventional theatre pieces. Bowles distinctly concentrates on the linguistic analysis of specific scenes in American dramatic texts to trace narrative devices and associate them with the classification that he proposes. The present volume is more interested in the attention that American playwrights and theatre practitioners put on stories, rather than on the linguistic aspect of the texts discussed. This means that some of the chapters will explore the ways in which narrators of stories (playwrights, performers, or characters) will inevitably make a decision on what to include and what to leave out during the actual act of storytelling, accentuating the importance and meaning of the “non-dit”. Some contributors to this book have stressed the fact that the theatrical texts they analyze were designed as a direct result of the silenced stories that were left out the official record, from American collective memory. The intrinsic connection that exists between memory and the act of storytelling will be explored in three different levels: the unreliability of memory, the subjectivity of memory and the selectivity of memory. Some of the stories compiled here expose examples of characters/theatre practitioners misrepresenting a given event as in the case of the Ghost Dance; some other, unveil the willful subjectivization of specific episodes, as in Rabe’s or Wilson’s plays; and finally, some other stories reshape the original memory, to create a new text, as in Parks’s or Ruhl’s plays.

One of the goals of this book is to trace the development of storytelling in the history of American Drama. This concept is traditionally associated with the genre of narrative (biographies, novels, novellas and short stories), regardless of the plot being based on true events or fiction. However, the rationale behind the present title is to consider that telling stories is part of the essence of American drama. From its inception in early colonial times to the most recent Off-Broadway productions, American dramatists have resorted to conveying their messages through

the crafting of stories, even when that implied blurring the boundaries between genres. The influence that narrative has on drama, also works reversely, that is, essays and novels can be impregnated by the theatrical culture of a period.

This book offers its readers different approaches to the act of storytelling, from studying plays that include the actual narration of tales and legends, to analysing specific playwriting styles, to discussing plays that provide their characters with the opportunity of voicing their otherwise silenced versions of the story. The present collection includes chapters not only about specific plays, but also about the stories surrounding the history of American drama, that is, the experiences of professionals such as dramatists, performers, stage directors, choreographers, and even a psychotherapist. In connection with this historical perspective, the essays have been arranged in chronological order, considering the production date of the plays discussed. Structural coherence was also a key factor when organising the chapters, that is why a strict chronological sequence was not followed with chapters ten and eleven.

A second goal of this book, as suggested in its title, is to provide new readings to often analysed theatrical texts and also to cast light on previously neglected plays. On the one hand, there are several chapters that deal with canonized playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neil but instead of studying them from the usual epistemological point of view they offer readers a new interpretation of these writers’ works. On the other hand, some other essays focus on lesser known texts, such as Elsie Janis’s monologues and the Ghost Dance from Sioux folklore, or on less famous authors such as William Wells Brown, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, and Katherine D. Chapman Tillman. That these texts and dramatists are not so well known and not usually anthologized does not necessarily speak of their artistic value, but of the prejudices of the period when they were created. As scholars are becoming more open-minded in studying less canonized texts, these performative creations qualify now as dramatic texts.

Our third and final goal is to explore the transforming power of theatre, and to discover the influence of the plays discussed in American society through history. The concept of transformation sometimes refers to the author and how a theme evolves in their oeuvre, thus reflecting a change in their way of thinking. And some other times this shift occurs not as an individual’s evolution but as a change in society’s views. Prejudices are overcome, stereotypes are dismantled, and therefore these texts remain the same but the scholars and critics appraising them do not.

The first chapter of the current collection is written by Isabel Calderón,

who considers that Judith Sargent Murray has been ignored as a dramatist because her plays were in production for a short period of time. Calderón argues that this disregard of Murray's theatrical writings overlooks the fact that in the Republican Period the reminiscence of Puritanism implied a strong bias against theatre in general and women dramatists in particular. Murray's defense of theatre, at a time when it was conceived as a sign of corruption, did not limit itself to her writing of plays, but it was also present somehow in her poems and essays. All her texts contain the same epistemological rationale (that is, the same stories) with a recurrent presence of the same topics (female equality, writing as a profession for women, female rational capability, and Woman's thirst for knowledge.) Calderón is especially interested in analyzing the intertextuality of Murray's plays, particularly *The Medium, or Happy Tea-Party* and *Virtue Triumphant* as she considers them as clear examples of the connection between Murray's and drama writing.

In "Tracing the Romance of Theatre in some Classic Nineteenth-century Novels," María Ángeles Toda explains how in Europe many degrees in English and American Studies offer hardly any courses on American Drama. Bearing this in mind, Toda proposes a didactic tool to expose university students enrolled in these courses to American drama. Aware that theatre is present in a number of canonical novels from the nineteenth century, Toda explains how by analyzing certain aspects of these novels, it is possible to explore the theatrical culture of the period and therefore make students more aware of the historical context in which drama was written. Thus, by reading old stories from a new perspective, María Ángeles Toda establishes the strong connection and mutual influence that these two genres, drama and fiction, share.

Joshua E. Polster, in "The Influence of White Culture on the Sioux Ghost Dance of 1890," explains how the arrival of white society to the Americas brought with it the destruction of Native American culture. At the end of the 1800s, the forced relocation to reservations together with hunger, despair and a feeling of gradually losing their cultural heritage made some Sioux leaders transform their traditional Ghost Dance ceremony into a restoration of their identity. This way, the original circle dance became not just a ritual by which the living would be reunited with the spirits of the dead but a political statement demanding the recovery of Sioux identity, lands, and traditions. This revitalization movement, inspired by the Paiute medicine man Wovoka, was a theatrical performance that included songs, music and artifacts. Ironically enough, and as Polster demonstrates, the Ghost Dance of 1890 was heavily influenced by white society, particularly by the evangelism of Mormons and Shakers.

Chapter four, by Jocelyn A. Brown, is devoted to tracing the intertextuality present in those African American plays written in the decades right before and after the American Civil War. Brown's "archeological work" revisits plays that have not been performed or thoroughly studied since their original production. After years of oblivion, and following their publication in 1974, these plays have gained limited scholarly attention. Acknowledging that African American drama in the nineteenth century was not abundant, and therefore its social influence was somehow limited, Brown stresses that nevertheless the plays by William Wells Brown, Mary Burill, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Katherine D. Chapman Tillman and Joseph Cotter offered a common ground where to build African American consciousness from.

Felicia Hardison Londré offers us a glimpse of the six-month experience of American comedienne Elsie Janis as a volunteer entertaining the American troops at the front and in military hospitals in France during the First World War (1914-1919). As Londré explains, Janis was so influenced by what she had seen and felt during her European stay that she spent the rest of her life ruminating and re-wording those events by writing about them, singing them, reliving them to the point of obsession. As many former combatants, Janis remembered the hard moments among the seriously wounded, and the danger faced during the bombings, but above all she remembered her six months of comradeship, bravery, and sense of purpose. By studying Elsie Janis's monologues, Londré expands the canon including in it a performative act that would not be traditionally labeled as a theatrical piece.

In "Sex Machines: Futurism and Modernity in American Expressionist Theater," Yiyi López-Gándara exposes the use of machines as a central element in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922) and *Dynamo* (1929), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928). Scholars have usually analysed these expressionist texts as presenting the mechanization of modern society as a cause of fear and anxiety; although López-Gándara does not reject this reading, she proposes that for these playwrights machines were also an object of desire. Influenced by another *avant-garde* movement, Futurism, American expressionist artists saw machines as a fetishized representation of modernity. López-Gándara wonders whether emphasizing the negative view on technology is so clear in the analyzed texts or it is a result of how most original productions presented the plays.

In chapter seven, "Triangular Transgressions: Tennessee Williams' *The Purification*'s Debt to Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*," José Badenes analyses the plot and style of Lorca's and Williams' above

mentioned plays to trace the obvious parallelisms between the two texts. Although there are no clear evidences of Williams having read *Blood Wedding*, by studying his biographies and correspondence Badenes demonstrates how Williams was familiar with Lorca's poems and sympathized with his ideology. Badenes's analysis of the influence of Lorca on Williams focuses primarily on the way both playwrights use the love triangle plot. This representation of forbidden desire highlights these authors representation of human sexuality as a symbol of freedom and a departure from conventions.

In "Under House Arrest: The Family in American Drama," Henry Schvey analyzes how some twentieth-century American playwrights reinterpreted the notion of family. If in previous centuries family was represented as a secure haven for the individual, Schvey argues that contemporary drama depicts familial relations as incoherent, unstable and a source of turmoil. This chapter focuses particularly on Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947), Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), and Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) and *Buried Child* (1979). Although they are very different from a stylistic and thematic perspective, these five plays share a common presentation of family as a debilitating, castrating, and/or damaging element in the lives of their protagonists.

Christiane Desafy-Grignard, in chapter nine, reviews Arthur Miller's plays from *The Simon Trilogy* in the 1930s to *The Last Yankee* in 1994 to find out if sexism is present and to what extent. Analyzing Miller's work from a feminist perspective, by focusing on his portrayal of female characters, Desafy-Grignard tries to determine whether his depiction of women is homogeneous throughout his career or it reflects an evolution.

From his first plays to those written during the 1950s Miller's plays portray men as the characters around who everything evolves; however, from the mid 1950s to Miller's death in 2005 his work offers in almost every case a female protagonist. Desafy-Grignard discusses whether this change represents a real change in Miller's attitude towards women or just a superficial make-over.

Chapter ten is devoted to tracing the concept of storytelling and subjectivity in several plays by August Wilson and David Rabe. By focusing on Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971) and *Streamers* (1976), together with Wilson's *Ma' Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1987), Ahmet Bese explores how the protagonists created by these two playwrights construct their identities through the stories and lies that they tell and retell to the other characters in the plays. According to Bowles, distorted reminiscences can be created not only in

the actual changing of the details of a story, but “it is the selectivity that distorts” (122).

Combining truth and lies through their several retellings of past events, Wilson’s and Rabe’s characters create their own personas by means of storytelling. With this analysis Ahmet Bese establishes a clear parallelism between two playwrights who are not usually studied together, thus offering his readers a new perspective.

Virginia Dakari in her “Cancer on the American Popular Stage: Playing to a Sold Out House,” considers the representability and marketability of disease as it is tackled in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Margaret Edson’s *Wit* (1995), and Susan Miller’s *My Left Breast* (1994). While the last two plays revolve around their protagonists’ fight with ovarian and breast cancer, respectively, in Williams’s play cancer is a less obvious part of the story. In *Cat* the disease and immediate death of Big Daddy is part of a subplot usually left aside by scholars, who tend to focus on the younger characters. Dakari’s theoretical framework is informed, among others, by Susan Sontag’s critique of the aestheticization of cancer and Barbara Ehrenreich’s conceptualization of the existence of a lucrative cancer marketplace.

Chapter twelve, by Nelson Barré, is devoted to the study of Suzan-Lori Parks’s rewriting of American history in her plays *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1995), *Venus* (1995), *In the Blood* (1999), *Fucking A* (2000), and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001). Barré is interested in discovering how Parks searches for truth and meaning in the world she has constructed. According to Barré, Parks challenges traditional cultural mythology, with its concept of family, by reconsidering well-known stories. Resorting to contemporary feminist revisions of narrative, Barré explains how Parks reclaims and reenacts a forgotten past on stage. Barré insists that Parks moves beyond the rewriting of history to the creation of new “histories” through the act of re-membering historical events, and she does so through the performance of history. In Barré’s view, Parks defies the myths around which Americans have constructed narratives that elevate half-fulfilled promises of equality and salvation from the stains of history.

“Freeing the Narrative: Interdisciplinary Methods for Exploring American identity in La Chiusa’s *The Wild Party* (2006) and Kander and Ebb’s *Curtains* (2000)”, by Gary M. Grant, Nancy Grant and Dustyn Martincich, is the only chapter in this book to discuss musical theatre. Grant et al focus on Bucknell University’s production of these two musicals, providing us with the comments of the stage director, the choreographer and a psychotherapist. Their goal is to bring to light the

deeply rooted connections that actors have with the characters that they perform to unveil musical theatre as a more authentic experience, beyond the mere singing and dancing. This chapter also explores the ways in which the use of physical masks in the narrative of these two musicals can be employed as a sign of the development of character identity.

The two last essays in this volume analyze the plays of Sarah Ruhl. On the one hand, we have Ola Kraszpulska's focus on scenography as she considers that the performance of Ruhl's plays brings out metaphysical ideas through visual examinations. Kraszpulska argues that both Metaphysics and Theatre share a common concern for the fundamental nature of being, particularly in the sense of conceiving a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses. Kraszpulska analyzes *Passion Play* (2003), *Eurydice* (2003), *Clean House* (2005), *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2007), *In the Next Room* (2009). Kraszpulska considers that Sarah Ruhl's texts help stage designers in creating a world of suggestive reality, a metaphysical realm. In these four plays, as well as in her other titles, Ruhl distills the essence of life, creating a study in metaphysics.

On the other hand, Noelia Hernando-Real focuses only on this last play, *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*. Hernando-Real proposes that, as opposed to what male playwrights have traditionally arranged, Ruhl creates multiple triangular relationships for her female characters so that they can reinvent themselves, their homes and their love. The most unexpected triangle of all is the one formed by the protagonists, Mrs. Givings, her husband, Dr. Givings, and a vibrator. Hernando-Real concludes that *In the Next Room* teaches spectators, both men and women, to reconsider their love stories and the triangular love that supports them. But it particularly tells the story of Mrs. Givings, a woman who has bravely defied her defective triangular love that artificially supported her home by becoming an agent in her own love story.

The present volume contains also an appendix in which Claudia Barnett introduces her unpublished play *He Killed My Bird, or Now that We're in Heaven* (2012) along with a brief preface in which she explains how this one-act play brings together the female protagonists of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916), Maureen Watkins's *Chicago* (1926), Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in this House* (1980) and Carson Kreitzer's *Self-Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* (2004). All of these characters are inspired by real women who gained notoriety after being indicted for murder. Barnett envisages a conversation in which the murderers, while waiting to enter heaven, are given the chance to explain the motives behind their crimes thus allowing them to voice what they were previously denied, both in real life and in the



original plays.

Once introduced the different parts that constitute this book, let us say a few words on its editors: We are specialists on American drama and members of a research group focusing on this topic (HUM-302, University of Málaga). We often collaborate organizing international conferences, lectures, and other academic activities aimed at spreading the results of both our study and that of other Americanists. Among the events we have coordinated are four international conferences on American theatre and drama held at the Universities of Málaga, Cádiz, and Seville in the years 2000, 2004, 2009, and 2012. During these four-day symposia scholars from all over the world gather to discuss their research on American drama, creating a fruitful exchange of ideas around the specific topic of each of the conferences. They offer all participants not only the opportunity to learn from what other colleagues are reading on, but also the chance to compare how the study of US drama differs from one country to another. Before these conferences were organized, most universities in Spain did not devote too much space in their syllabi to the study of the theatre performed in the United States. Fortunately, this has changed gradually with more American literature courses including plays as part of their compulsory reading. Even entire courses devoted to American theatre are now being taught at graduate and postgraduate level. A similar evolution is taking place in other European countries.

Over the years these academic activities have fostered strong scholarly bonds that have resulted in the publication of several volumes about different aspects of this field of research.<sup>1</sup> It was in the aftermath of the last international conference, held in Seville in 2012, that we decided to contact some of our colleagues, both from Spain and overseas, to prepare a collection of essays on the topic of narration on the American stage; taking the idea of 'stage' not necessarily as the place confined within the walls of the theatre, but more widely as the performative space where other arts, such as dancing, can be developed.

We were particularly interested in researching the connection between drama and telling stories, whether focusing on the transforming power of recounting, on the use of retelling old stories, or on offering new readings of already well-known narrations. In any case, we never intended for this book to be an anthology on narratology or rhetoric, but on how American drama uses narrative as a dramatic tool.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY TRIUMPHANT: *THE MEDIUM AS RATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT*

DR. ISABEL CALDERÓN-LÓPEZ  
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[I]t is for mental strength I mean to contend, for with respect to animal powers, I yield them undisputed to that sex, which enjoys them in common with the lion, the tyger, and many other beasts of prey. (Judith Sargent Murray, “On the Equality of the Sexes”)

Life is not without its attendant mysteries; one of these pertains to the scant literary afterlife of Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820). Despite the prolific writing career that this intellectual developed during the early republic in Massachusetts as an essayist, poet, playwright, writer of fiction and letters, both the paucity and content of the body of criticism on her wide-ranging personal and intellectual achievements reveal that her longing for posterity has in the long run unfairly met indifference at best and condemnation at worst. As Therese B. Dykeman puts it, “[i]n the 1930s, Vena Bernadette field, her main biographer, deemed her writing to be of ‘minor’ significance, and Mary Summer Beson found it didactic and tedious, and still in the 1980s Jacqueline Hornstein termed it ‘sentimental moralizing’” (217). It is difficult to come up with good reasons to explain why Murray’s legacy continues to be a controversial issue despite evidence that she was a revolutionary and a pioneer several times over. By way of illustration, in her landmark essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790), for which she is best known, Murray made the first public claim for female equality in America, two years before Mary Wollstonecraft published her renowned “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” (1792), with identical demands for female education to bring women level with men on rational grounds.

Murray’s intellectual concerns seem to have originated early in her own experience as a girl greedy for knowledge, the daughter of socially

prominent parents who catered to her scholarly thirst even if, unlike her brother Winthrop, Judith could have never aspired to Harvard.<sup>1</sup> Later in life, she could—though not without censure—choose to dissent from the established Church along with her family, and profess Universalism, a liberal branch of Protestantism that defended religious freedom and the equality of souls in God’s eyes. Her publication in 1782 of a Universalist catechism attests to Murray’s determination as well as consistency as an upholder of equality and instruction. It was the earliest writing by an American Universalist woman.

Murray’s heroic pioneering and her interests did not stop at that, but had continuity and in fact flourished in the 1790s in Boston, where she moved with John Murray, her second husband, after being widowed by John Stevens. There in the capital the couple could share intellectual and religious concerns, John Murray being —no wonder for a woman of firsts— the founder of Universalism in the United States. Murray’s Bostonian flourishing as a writer bore abundant and tasty fruit: she contributed regular essays to the *Massachusetts Magazine*, one of the leading journals of the day. In them Murray vented her progressive ideas on equality, women’s education, theology, drama, with such fervor and craving for favorable reception that she chose to shield herself from public censure for writing on such themes behind pen names such as “Constantia,” “The Gleaner,” “Mr. Vigillius,” or “The Reaper.” When in 1798 Murray published a three-volume edition of her *Gleaner* essays, she became the first woman in America to self-publish a book, and a successful book at that, which attracted over 700 subscribers, among them President Adams and George Washington. Murray thus succeeded in establishing a position for herself at the center of cultural and political activity.

Though not a complete account for a life amply documented thanks to the happy conjunction of Murray’s verbosity and her desire for posterity, this biographical sketch may suffice to understand the need to restore her due to Murray. For, as another popular truism about human existence goes, *life is unfair*, and in the present case it has capriciously relegated this “first feminist,” this “mother of the American Republic” (Schofield 1990, 29-32), this first American Universalist woman, to obscurity. Furthermore, Murray has oftentimes been cast in the mold of “a most complex author,” owing to the monumental quantity and variety of her work, punctuated by inconsistencies and contradictions (Scobell 9). Even more importantly for our purposes here, Murray’s contribution to the history of early American drama has repeatedly been downplayed mostly on grounds of eighteenth-

century performance and reception circumstances beyond her control. As Harris notes,

[s]cholars have typically assumed that the quality of [Murray's] plays warranted their short runs. However, such assumptions ignore the bias against female playwrights (xxxvii)

In what follows, hence, it will be argued that Judith Sargent Murray stands in need of reassessment as a highly consistent authoress who, though in different guises and through different voices, inflected the same topics all throughout her career with a very clear educational agenda, regardless of the chosen genre, and despite writing in a transitional age marked by turmoil and change. As a concomitant result of this epistemological perspective, Murray will emerge as a woman dramatist who merits consideration as a foremother of the American stage both for her contribution to dramatic criticism, namely, for her eulogy of the theater at a time when it was conceived by many as the site of dreaded corruption. Likewise, as a dramatist who not only was the first American—male or female—to have a play performed at the Boston Theatre, but also ventured to put her theories of the “utility” of drama into practice in the guise of the then dominant romance brimming with tears, so as to render the intellectual side to her drama more palatable to an audience used to transatlantic sentimental plays.

### **Yes, I must write**

Thus opens the poem entitled “Lines written in my closet,” one of Murray’s most personal compositions and a very interesting one for the keys to her authorial stance it contains. The inaugural affirmative interjection sounds like the compelling reassurance after a long-held self-debate as to the convenience of writing. The reasons for such a conclusion in the affirmative all refer to her subjective well-being: “it soothes, and calms my mind, / And with my pen, my fairest hours I find” (ll.1-2). Murray thus imbued the process of writing with therapeutic virtues, which might partly account for her copious production. She lived through a transitional age in which beliefs sanctioned by tradition collided with rebellious, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian ideals (Scobell 4-9). Hers was a world of light and shade that bestowed on women a new dignity in the figure of the Republican mother, as instructor in the ideas and values of the new nation encouraging their education; but, paradoxically, continued to keep them separate from the public sphere as mothers within their domestic confines. It is against this background that Murray’s poem

sounds its full implications: it phrases Murray's closet as a fertile *locus amoenus poeticus*, distant from cares, providing enclosed shelter "[w]hen heart felt sorrows every where surround, / And with their barbed arrows deeply wound" (ll. 13-14); and guarding her against "the censuring tongue of rancrous malice" (l. 16). Murray's wording conjures up a military siege to signify the hostile, slanderous world outside, while it sacralises her closet's inner space by having God preside over the room ("[n]one but my Father God my conduct views, / Who with paternal love my steps pursues;" ll. 17-18), and herself feel "sacred joy" (l. 6), like a hermit in "[m]y lov'd retreat, my little sheltering place" (l. 8). Murray's closet poem is therefore most valuable in that it signals the woman's vital need for intellectual activity, the great divide for her between the public and private spheres, the hostility of the former, and her sense of vulnerability when having to confront reception. For heard she would be.

### Yes, I confess

With these words, Murray opens her serial essays entitled "The Gleaner" that she wrote for the *Massachusetts Magazine* from 1792 to 1794. What the writing hand goes on to confess is great ambition for fame: "I love the paths of fame, / And ardent wish to glean a brightening name" (*Gleaner I* 13). The confession must have been quite familiar to those of Murray's close acquaintance, but for her *Gleaner* essays she assumed the identity of a male character, Mr. Vigillius, "observing, in a variety of instances, the indifference, not to say contempt, with which female productions are regarded" (*Gleaner III* 313). Paradoxically then, her craving for recognition led Murray to disembodiment, to concealment beneath a male character. Thus closeted, Murray could aspire to public acclaim and to make her writing effectual albeit vicariously. In Mr. Vigillius' own words,

I am *rather* a plain man, who, after spending the day in making provision for my little family, sit myself comfortably down by a clean hearth, and a good fire, enjoying, through these long evenings, with an exquisite zest, the pleasures of the hour, whether they happen to be furnished by an amusing tale, a well written book, or a social friend. (*Gleaner I* 13-14)

The cozy and enjoyable closeted space reveals an uncanny resemblance between Murray and Vigillius, but for the former's sense of entrenchment as opposed to the latter's public dimension. The likeness continues as Vigillius declares his "violent desire to become a writer," his "unaccountable itch for scribbling" (14), and his choice of "an appellation":

I have thought best to adopt, and I do hereby adopt, the name, character, and avocation of a GLEANER ... [F]eeling myself entitled to toleration as a Gleaner, in this expressive name I shall take shelter, standing entirely regardless of every charge relative to property, originality, and every thing of this nature, which may be preferred against me. (15-16)

Murray's anxiety over authorship might have led her to the production of "The Repository," another column of essays for the same journal and during the same time lapse, under the pen name of Constantia. As in a set of Chinese boxes, Gleaner contains Vigillius, Vigillius contains Constantia, and Constantia contains Murray, who thus shielded herself from the censorious audience in order to impart her rebellious musings to them. Still, in 1794 Murray produced another essay series "The Reaper," for the *Federal Orrery*, though it was stopped short soon after her disagreement over editorial intrusive procedures. Murray's indefatigable writing venture turned her into a "'Protean' subject" (Desiderio 11), assuming different authorial identities, even though either behind Constantia (i.e. constant) or Vigillius (i.e. vigilant); behind Gleaner, Repository or Reaper, one can always sense the same anxious persevering industry that led this ambitious eighteenth-century American writer from domestic enclosure to vast media fields. There was as yet some dangerous ground to tread: the theater.

### **Yes, I maintain it**

Once again in the affirmative, denoting conviction and resolution, the words opening *The Medium, or Happy Tea-Party* (later retitled in print as *Virtue Triumphant*), the first of two plays written by Murray one year after "The Reaper" project, may nicely serve to introduce this section on her dramatic enterprise as climactic proof of consistent perseverance in her favorite epistemological topics.<sup>2</sup> It was actually as *The Reaper* that Murray somehow advanced the subject matter of her first comedy. The essay in question recounts the story of the contrary extremes to which the Reaper (Murray herself) went when a poor old man knocked on her door begging some money. As the Reaper, Murray narrates how, though wholly uncommiserate at first, on her little daughter's compassionate remark about the man being old and sick, she gave him all she then had on her, thus alternating between meanness and squandering. *The Reaper* concludes:

[E]qually avoiding opposite extremes, I should have pursued the calm and happy medium, which results from that order, which is the offspring of wisdom. (“The Reaper” no. 2 10)

In Murray’s Enlightenment epistemological-moral rationale, “wisdom” adumbrates “order” and “order,” in turn, adumbrates the golden mean or “happy medium.” The egalitarian principle was not new in Murray’s pen; indeed it was the be-all and end-all of her philosophy all throughout her motley writing. As the true child of an age that held Equality as one of its most precious ideals, Murray conjugated it in many of its forms, mostly in the Christian egalitarianism of her Universalist Church and in the gender egalitarianism she missed no opportunity to advocate. Both converge early in her writing career in the composition of her *Catechism* and “On the Equality of the Sexes.” Both anchor Murray’s egalitarian arguments in a series of questions designed to dismantle the received notions of the blind multitude. In the latter, for example, Murray asks “in what the minds of females are so notoriously deficient or unequal (132).<sup>3</sup> And again, about men’s much-trumpeted rational superiority: “May we not trace its source in the difference of education, and continued advantages?” (133). Eventually, Constantia’s defiant tone gives way to pointed, irate declaration of equality in her usual interjection in the affirmative:

Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us. (134)

Murray’s personal declaration of independence is then firmly buttressed by witty factual evidence. She proves, for example, the fallacy of the received notion that physical strength is coterminous with mental capacity, by bringing up the case of Mr. Pope, a man of “enervated” and “diminutive” body, but the representative of the Age of Reason. Subsequently, Murray resorts to the Bible for more evidence in order to “combat that vulgar, that almost universal error” (224) of man’s superiority, and states her intention “to bend the whole of my artillery against those supposed proofs” (224) provided by the opposing male side. Murray’s “artillery” is dialectic, heavy with antithetical argumentation, aimed at disclosing wrong perception and the tyranny of custom; its effects, devastating: not only does she engage in desacralization by reducing David to someone “enervated by his licentious passions” (223), or Job to a curse on “the day of his nativity” (223); but Murray’s exegesis turns it all over, and ends up revealing Eve *not*



governed by any one sensual appetite; but merely by a desire of adorning her mind; a laudable ambition fired her soul, and a thirst for knowledge impelled the predilection so fatal in its consequences. (225)

Conversely,

Adam could not plead the same deception; assuredly he was not deceived, ... as he had proof positive of the fallacy of the argument, which the deceiver had suggested. (225)

The use of forensic tactics seems attuned to Murray's epistemological concerns, and proves, in the very act of (clever) writing, the point on female rational capability that the text everywhere seeks to make. Self-reflection also seems to underlie Eve's characterization as a woman avid for knowledge. This biblical version of Murray herself, a victim of her own epistemological craving, bears an uncanny resemblance to other female characters in her writing. These tend to be strong, have a firm resolve, but are normally orphaned figures in need of protection. Eliza Clairville is one such figure in *Virtue Triumphant*, the play that Murray chose to write after her essays, but one that must have been always on her mind, since, judging from her preceding work, neither the comedy's subject-matter nor its ideological approach were anything new. In fact, as Dykeman puts it, "[v]irtue [is] the organizing theme of *The Gleaner*" (1999, 222). Furthermore, according to Edward Watts, "[t]he plays themselves mirror the internal drama of *The Gleaner*" (69), that to him as to Mary Anne Schofield is that "[m]ale perception is inaccurate throughout ..., and the women take it upon themselves to educate the male properly" (1991, 266). In fact, (male) prejudice and custom are cast in the roles of villains in a comedy whose epilogue makes the triumph of virtue dependent on "truth [that] brightens to the eye" of "the observing mind" (87), almost a paratextual indication as to how the play's potential recipients should approach the composition for its full meaning and their maximum benefit.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent, the transition from poetry, letter and essay writing to drama in Murray's *oeuvre* all seems but natural. Skemp, for example, argues that Murray's "own letters were lively and amusing, filled with bits of dialogue and little vignettes that never failed to entertain" (2009, 250). Elsewhere, Skemp also brings out Murray's use of dialogue "as a pedagogical tactic" in her *Catechism* to bear upon her composition of drama (2009, 445). Murray's groundwork in the practice of dialogue notwithstanding, if we judge from the content of her plays, it seems equally plausible to trace a connection between essay and drama writing.

So much so that many of Murray's essays, well stocked with characters and dialogued parts, are imbued with dramatic quality. In Baym's words, characters such as

Clarinda Meanwell, or Charles Candour—figure in brief stories illustrating the value of Murray's favorite virtues and the dire consequences of neglecting them (x)

Nothing less is present in *Virtue Triumphant*, with similar allegorical names such as Matronia Aimwell or Dorinda Scornwell, and equally involved in the same morality play aesthetics. Conversely, Murray's plays, inflecting and assaying topics pivotal to her essays such as equality, education, and marriage from different perspectives, might be read as essays performed on the boards. This realization lays bare Murray's consistent agenda, as she turned from essays to drama, carrying with her the same tenets even though the new medium was more public. According to Skemp, Murray

was comfortable writing for the *Massachusetts Magazine*, where her readers were an 'invisible public,' existing in her own mind (2009, 252)

Her playwriting instead entailed not just the fleshing out of her long-held arguments in the unpredictable bodies and voices of actors and actresses, but also the incarnation and visibility of her mental public, her face-to-face encounter with the long-feared "licentious rabble" (Skemp 2009, 237). And reality proved to be even more fearsome, with actors forgetting their lines, and herself "laid open to all the severity of criticism" (*Gleaner I* ix). Hence, Murray's play writing signals her progressive abandonment of reclusion in the peaceful and safe retirement of her closet, for the noisy and exposed stage of the public world. But the attempt must have been worth her while, given the alluring prospects of educating her fellow-citizens in her open-minded egalitarianism. In her own words,

[t]he stage is undoubtedly a very powerful engine in forming the opinions and manners of a people. Is it not then of importance to supply the American stage with American scenes? (*Gleaner III* 262)

In the public sphere, the new republican female ideal provided Murray with a privileged stand, her audience embodying the offspring to be educated and supervised in the new American moral and ethical values. So much, for instance, is inferred from the role she arrogated to herself in her column of the *Massachusetts Magazine* as a champion for the dramatic

arts “at a time when it was not popular to do so, especially for a woman” (Bennett 33). In Gay Gibson’s words:

In March, 1795, two years before the licensing of the Boston theatre, many Bostonians associated the stage with upper-class decadence, class intermingling, loose morals, disease, and prostitution. Associating with those who labored in the theatre ruined a woman’s reputation, because to the pious, the theatre was a place of febrile emotions and dangerous imaginings. It was certainly a space forbidden to ministers’ wives. (171)

These obstacles notwithstanding, Murray opposed antitheater legislation and went on to eulogize the theatre mostly for the intellectual benefits it portended. In so doing she engaged in the current central debate over the state and usefulness of American theater at a time when it was mostly regarded as an entertainment that threatened to destroy the new innocent Republic with the corruption of the English scenes which were then so much the vogue.<sup>5</sup> The difference though was in Murray’s conception of the theatre as “an entertainment so incontrovertibly rational” (*Gleaner III* 226); it was a matter of emphasis, though not for that a small matter. Mercy Otis Warren, for example, also raised her voice in defense of the theater in her preface to *The Sack of Rome* (1790), and held that in

[t]heatrical amusements ... in an age of taste and refinement, lessons of morality, and the consequences of deviation, may perhaps, be as successfully enforced from the stage, as by modes of instruction. (11)

Both women dramatists then agreed on the usefulness of the theatre: to Mercy Otis Warren, as a container of practical lessons in morality; to Murray, as an agent of instruction, “highly influential in regulating the opinions, manners and morals of the populace” (*Gleaner I* 227). This larger, more inclusive concept of the theater lies at the heart of Murray’s dramatic musings in essay 24 in *The Gleaner* series:

I conceive it will not be denied that, from a chaste and discretely regulated theatre, many attendant advantages will indisputably result. Young persons will acquire a refinement of taste and manners; they will learn to think, speak, and act, with propriety; a thirst for knowledge will be originated; and from attentions, at first, perhaps, constituting only the amusement of the hour, they will gradually proceed to more important inquiries. (*I* 230)

In Murray’s ideology, the useful instrumentality of the theater not only metamorphoses simple young persons into refined American citizens, able to exercise their minds virtuously, with propriety; but its agency goes

beyond the stage by promising that the dramatic experience will make the children of the new American Republic inquisitive, Eve-like figures with “a thirst for knowledge.” In other words, it would give them food for thought while whetting their rational appetite for more. Hence, Murray envisages an optimistic future when “the audience will refine the players, and the players will refine the audience” (240), an interactive process of mutuality resulting in overall improvement. Once again the voice of the visionary resounds with solemnity to announce that,

The theatre opens a wide field for literary exertions; and we anticipate a rich harvest of intellectual pleasure and improvement. The sons and daughters of fancy, the sentimentalist, and the moralist; these will engage in the interesting competition. (*The Gleaner* I 228-29)

Quite interestingly, Murray’s reflection here seems to contain the three pillars of her dramatic architecture as playwright: reason (“fancy”), sentiments (“sentimentalist”), and morality (“moralist”), in that order. Thus, in keeping with the vogue for moral pieces conveying the triumph of virtue—a key republican ideal—in the sentimental tradition of English Restoration plays,<sup>6</sup> Murray’s drama, in particular her first play, *Virtue Triumphant*, makes virtue and its triumph dependent on the supremacy of reason rather than sentiments, that become instrumental.

*The Medium, or Happy Tea-Party* was performed at the Federal Street Theater on March 2 1795. For this most public event, Murray renewed the authorial mask by announcing on the title page of her play that it had been written by “a Citizen of the United States.” With it she might have tried to secure acceptance from those compatriots who favored the creation of a native dramatic tradition (Skemp 2009, 252-53), even though bold statements of nationalism are really kept to a minimum in the comedy (Richards 87). Despite Murray’s efforts, the convergence of unskilled actors and ill-intentioned criticism put paid to her play:

[E]verything fell apart. One actress forgot her lines, burst into tears, and fled the stage. The rest of the cast barely ‘hobbled through’. (Skemp 2009, 255)

Unfortunately, the severe reception of *Virtue Triumphant* after its performance, like a curse, continues to hang on Murray’s dramatic production, while concessions to merit in her plays have a marginal, coda-like character to them. As a recent example, Skemp writes:

Neither *The Medium*—or *Virtue Triumphant* as Judith ultimately called it—nor *The Traveller Returned* were unusually bad or especially good. ... But most modern critics would probably agree with Zoe Detsi-Diamanti's assessment of *Virtue Triumphant* as "stilted and dull." *The Traveller* was only marginally better. Both plays were derivative, filled with humorous stock characters and trite plotlines. Still, Judith's depiction of women was largely her own. And *Virtue Triumphant*, in particular, reflected an interestingly ambivalent attitude toward both marriage and class to which Judith did not usually admit. (2009, 261)

Despite initial concurrence with general trend among Murray's critics in the underestimation of her dramatic production, Skemp's coda acknowledges Murray's capacity for originality and debate on key issues in her time. Therefore, trying to reverse tradition, in the last section here, an attempt will be made to prove that Murray merits consideration as a foremother of the American stage on account of her defense and use of the theater as an intellectual site of debate, thus investing it with a dignity both denied it by her age, and unknown to the vacuous and trite sentimental plays brimming with tears that were then all the rage.

"YES, I maintain it; this project of my son's the height of *folly*" (*VT* 15; italics added). Starting thus *in media res*, with Ralph Maitland's firm assertion, the inaugurating exchanges in the play establish an epistemological framework in the way of a pregnant opening, that contains the keys to its meaning. Bearing in mind that the play's original title was *The Medium, or Happy Tea-Party*, Murray seems to have plunged into her topic, probably with the educational aim of circumscribing the abstraction of her title, of making the play concrete and useful to her audience from the very start. Thus, in answer to servant Weston's subsequent "As how, Sir?" Maitland replies:

As how, Sir? Has he not, passing by the happy *Medium*, beyond which no action can ever be right, rashly leaped all bounds, and pressed forward to that extremity, which being the farthest from the centre, is the greatest possible remove from the propriety and fitness of things? (*VT* 15)

Then, from the outset, Murray manages to make clear her subject matter, by defining it as the classical golden mean, and by fleshing out the abstract "medium" of the title in the character of Ralph Maitland. But, at the same time, she also reveals the difficulties attendant on the achievement of the Enlightenment idea as evident from Maitland's immoderate long-winded speech that, quite literally, to use his words above, leaps "all bounds." In fact, Weston remarks at once: "But, sir, may it not be necessary to observe a little moderation with the young

gentleman?” (VT 15). Herein lies one of the most pervasive ironies in the play: Ralph Maitland, the declared champion for equality, the center, the medium, is himself the model of fanaticism and error. This fact warns against the dangers of self-delusion if not guided by rational prudence, and puts spectators and readers on the alert against making rash judgments, since appearance can be so delusive. Without yet disclosing that “the height of folly” of Maitland’s son, Charles Maitland, is infatuation with the virtuous but poor Eliza Clairville, Murray sets out exchanges in the opening act that continue to inflect the rational subtext of the play and its overlap with the otherwise ethical Medium:

*Maitl.* [A] *Medium* is ever self-balanced—it is the centre of perfection—the philosopher’s stone—the genuine *panacea* for every evil. It is that divine alchemy [*sic*], the operation of which will finally transmute this iron age of ours, restoring the golden reign of philosophy and of reason. (VT 16)

This upholder of the prelapsarian golden age of reason, though, continues to prove its remoteness by rashly misrepresenting other characters and consequently finding his prejudice contradicted by new evidence at every turn. His most important mistake is his misjudgment of his son’s beloved Eliza Clairville, whom he deems an ambitious fortune-hunter (VT 17). But he also misconstrues his female counterpart, Matronia Aimwell, whose visit on financial business he misinterprets in terms of seduction. Whereas, to conceited Ralph Maitland, Matronia is just “a whimsical kind of woman” (VT 19) with a design to marry him; as her very name suggests and the play goes on to show, Matronia is a motherly figure “with the most upright intentions” (i.e. Aimwell; VT 24), whose only aim in life is the well-being of others under her protection. Murray thus confronts two parental figures in the characters of Ralph Maitland and Matronia Aimwell: the male one totally and foolishly absorbed in his philosophical raptures, one of “the votaries of folly” in Matronia’s words (VT 25); the female figure, instead, all-wise, protecting and always attentive to others’ needs. It is not the only debate at the heart of the play; subsequently, the play goes on to inflect in the “masks” of different characters, many of the pervasive topics, tenets, and even the dialectical method that we find elsewhere in Murray’s literary output.

Pivotal to *Virtue Triumphant* is another misconception, namely, the protagonist Eliza Clairville’s that she is the child of indigent parents. As a consequence, she refuses to marry upper-class Charles Maitland despite loving him deeply. She tells him: “I never, *but on equal terms*, will plight my faith with your’s” (VT 32), which again articulates Ralph Maitland’s