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Manly Progress*

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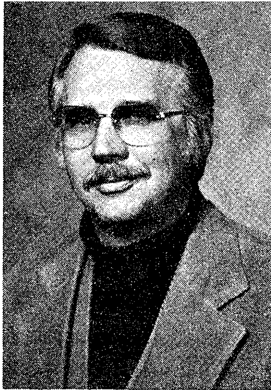

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When Colonel Manly walked onto the stage in 1787, he evoked a double response in one. He was at once a man of impeccable moral integrity and a man made in the image of the American dream. *The Contrast* by Royal Tyler gave the American audience precisely what that audience believed to be an attainable ideal: moral integrity and material success.

Whether or not one wishes to hang this two-headed albatross on the neck of the Puritans is not as important as the persistent presence of Manlys throughout American dramatic literature.

The work ethic, the ever-present conditions of heaven and hell, election and reprobation, the ten commandments and a rather commodious list of prohibitions—all these and more have their origin in early American Protestant theology. For easy reference, though not completely accurate, the general

*As a cultural expression, theatre provides a window by which one may look into social, national, economic, and political conditions of almost any country. America is no exception. The focus of this essay is on the rise and decline of the "American Dream," as demonstrated by the dramatic literature of that country. The essay begins with the first significant American play to be written, and ends with a modern play. In the process the typical American hero of theatre represents what is fundamentally American in spirit and in essence, beginning with Colonel Manly.

appellation of "Puritan Ethic" can be applied. The fact is that the Puritans were a mish-mash of splinter churches in England where they found a general unanimity by sharing a common fear and a common enemy: Roman Catholicism. Puritans joined under one slogan: purify the church. This meant mostly removing from liturgy and life any suggestion or symbol of Papism. That was their ambition in England.

When these Puritans ventured out together into the New World, they had a new point of consolidation, *viz*., making themselves secure against any future encroachment, such as the Catholic Church had been in the Old Country. Their self-determination, first to leave the homeland, and then to survive in an uncultivated and even hostile environment, not only bonded together various contentious factions, but also led them to believe in their innate and inventive capability to be perfect while asserting the doctrine of total depravity.

In *The Contrast* Colonel Manly is everything that a 1787 American audience expected him to be. He has served in the Revolutionary War, attaining to the rank of Colonel. He is precisely opposite of everything English, as his dilettante sister, Charlotte, says as she compares herself and her brother: "I am gay, he is grave; I am airy, he is solid; I am ever selecting the most pleasing objects for my laughter, he has a tear for every pitiful one."[1] Manly is not only above empty laughter, but also above empty use of time: "I neither drink nor game"; he says, "my errand is not of amusement, but business" (p. 57). Manly's defense of his country has gained him promissory notes for pay. In some sense he is a man of means, if not wealthy. His patriotism restrains him, however, from cashing in the notes, the country at the moment being unable to "support its credit" (p. 58). This benevolence is Manly's ultimate heroics, even morality. He pledges to carry the notes until America "is rich enough to discharge them," even if that is not possible in his lifetime—in which case the notes shall become "an honourable certificate to posterity" (p. 58). His morality shows up, too, in his sentimentalized statements: ". . . it is as justifiable to laugh at folly, as it is reprehensible to ridicule misfortune" (p. 59). Unadulterated truth spills once again from his lips when he says,

> In my opinion, the man, who, under pretensions of marriage, can plant thorns in the bosom of an innocent, unsuspecting girl, is more detestable than a common robber, in the same proportion, as private violence is more detestable than open force, and money of less value than happiness (p. 68).

Notably, Manly's sentimental moral wisdom is not diminished by his not having traveled or not having read. He defends, yes, calls "laudable," the ignorant, untraveled man, who finds enjoyment in the common things about him: "it injures no one; adds to their own happiness; and, when extended, becomes the noble principle of patriotism" (p. 71). Manly is no less honorable in defending a young girl from a narrow scrape with dishonor.

A close analysis of Colonel Manly in *The Contrast* points up two essential generalizations.

The first is Manly's unquestioned goodness. He speaks only good and wise thoughts, and his actions are—without qualification— honorable. The root-cause, the radical starting point for his morality, is never discussed or discovered, however. Why

is he unquestionably patriotic? Is patriotism unquestionably ethical? Why should one devote his life to the military defense of his country in the first place, or refuse, in the second place, to accept payment for his patriotism? And it isn't that the play, or Manly, does not make some rather fine distinctions. Broad assumptions are common in *The Contrast*, but by no means exclusive. For example this statement: "private violence is more detestable than open force." It is said without blanching, but, to the modern reader, it is more than a quibble; it is a debatable statement. Manly also finds it quite within his moral means to distinguish between "folly" and "misfortune." Such absolute distinctions make him a formidable candidate for God. And these god-like traits are hallowed by his rejection of amusements: "I neither drink nor game." Again the unquestioned goodness of Manly is asserted, and the assertion is made in confidence.

As there is no root-cause or radical starting point for Manly's morality, so there is no fundamental reason given why he works.

The second generalization about Manly is his devotion to serious occupation. He has been about the defense of his country, and, near the end of the play, he applies his defensive trade in saving his sister from the sinful and sinister intentions of a fop. He can not be idle. "My errand," he says at one point, "is not of amusement, but business." In giving up his pay from the government, he places himself in the need for employment to sustain himself and provide for his newly acquired wife by the end of the play, notwithstanding the lucky provision from her well-established, hard-working father. Manly has risen to the rank of colonel; he is in the context of the play successful; if not wealthy, he is free from the restrictions that poverty place on a man. His success is closely associated with, even a reward for, his willingness to work and apply himself. Morality and work are coterminous.

Before moving to other plays in the sequence of American dramatic literature, some connection—though tenuous—seems appropriate between Manly's goodness and his willingness to work. As there is no root-cause or radical starting point for Manly's morality, so there is no fundamental reason given why he works. Inappropriate as it may be in this paper, and requiring more substantiation than is presently possible, a hypothesis might be advanced, *viz*., that the two, organic goodness and the work principle, are self-serving counterparts, like two sides of a coin, whose combined ethic appeals to no third principle for their verification. They rise together, like two wings of the phoenix, bearing the burden of proof concealed between them. It is a myth, an invention, concocted by a practical, pioneering people in need of a new god for a new country.

This hypothesis follows from the nature of the American Puritan community. Having consolidated themselves on American soil, the last thing that the community could afford to have was internal strife over religious foundations. Whose theology from among the mish-mash splinters of religious thought would provide the root-cause or radical starting point for either morality or work? To answer the question from within the Puritan community would have been tantamount to anarchy. In need of each other, for security and strength in an uncultivated and hostile country, the community found itself

helpless in giving final cause for a life-style that was in general, common to them all, or at least ideally perceived. Each person might provide privately his own philosophy or religious point of departure, but anything public demanded religious neutrality. What better starting place than to invent the two-headed myth of work and morality? So the two, each serving to sustain the other, rose on American soil, and appeared as the operating principle in American dramatic literature. In the case of Manly, his benevolent attitude, his dedication, and his avoiding of amusements, are rewarded with the good fortune of marrying a well-heeled maiden.

The pilgrimage of Colonel Manly throughout American dramatic literature is not, however, predestined for the Celestial City. Without root-cause or a radical starting point, Manly's Celestial City turns out to the American Dream. Along the way he will be reinforced in his belief in the myth, but some day he will have to wake up. Manly is a kind of Rip Van Winkle, however, and sleeps far longer than is expected. *The Contrast* appeared in 1787, evoking the rootless myth, and, if popular television fare is taken into account, is still evoked in 1980; however, along the way, Manly's progress has had some restless moments.

A brief survey shows the progress of the morality/work invention ever present in American dramatic literature.

Anna Cora Mowatt Richie's *Fashion* (1845) is a case in point. In a half century Manly appears as the rough, self-made man, named appropriately, Adam Trueman. Like Manly he is without pretense, quite above the Tiffany household and its fashionable values. Trueman prides himself in his age and strength, presumably due to his rude, but clean life: "See me, man! seventy-two last August!—strong as a hickory and every whit as sound!"[2] His ethic about work is that it should be natural and uncomplicated, but rewarded with success. Trueman chides Mr. Tiffany: "I hear you are making money on the true, American, high pressure system—better go slow and sure— the more steam, the greater the danger of the boiler's bursting!" (p. 291). Tiffany's business is in trouble, not Trueman's. Trueman is a farmer, a man of soil— clearly a better way to make it big in America! He moralizes:

> And pray what is *fashion*, madam? An agreement between certain persons to live without using their souls! to substitute etiquette for virtue—decorum for purity—manners for morals! to affect a sham for the works of their Creator! and expend all their rapture upon the works of their tailors and dressmakers! (p. 301)

In an obligatory scene, Gertrude, a poor and noble girl, is found to be the long-lost daughter of Trueman. Gertrude is in love with a man who lacks only means, which are now assured from the new-found, rich father. Goodness and wealth (acquired naturally) are their own best rewards.

Another half century passes and the American myth shows up in James A. Herne's *Margaret Fleming* (1890). Henrik Ibsen's influence is present, but the myth survives. The problem of the play is driven more internal, and evil is not resident in one character— as in the foppish Dimple of *The Contrast*, or in Count Jolimaitre of *Fashion*. Evil, as displayed in the villain of the traditional melodrama, is now a social problem. Like goodness without radical cause,

evil had been rootless—clearcut, simple, like Topsy's "I just growed up." Herne puts a new twist on morality when he gives to the stage Philip Fleming, a man once given to lust and drink, now straight (even promising to give up cigars). He is discovered in his office, a successful businessman, but with a bothered conscience. He and Margaret have just had their first baby, and in the course of the play a second baby is born to Philip—a product of his lusty days. The events bring Margaret to a new understanding of human nature, and Philip's business into jeopardy. After a remarkable scene in which Margaret nourishes the second baby with her own milk—its mother having died—and the return of Philip who earlier ran away, the resolution comes with all the trappings of the American myth. How? By work, with which Philip will presumably earn his way back into moral dignity:

> Margaret. Go the mill tomorrow morning and take up your work again....
>
> Philip. Don't worry, Margaret, everything will be all right there now. I will put my whole heart and soul into my work....
>
> Margaret. The past is dead. We must face the living future. Now, Philip, there are big things ahead for you, if you will only look for them. They certainly will not *come to you*. I will help you—we will fight this together.[3]

Colonel Manly of 1787 has survived a century of American dramatic history, tainted only by the knowledge that a man may stumble, but recover if he puts his shoulder to the wheel. Another novelty in the Manly progress is that a woman, in this case Margaret, can rise above her station and prevail. In a classic sense *Margaret Fleming* proves that a woman can be Manly. Herne's play was not popularly received, its subject matter coming probably a decade ahead of its time.

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William Vaughan Moody's *The Great Divide* (1906) is motivated by questions about the national differences between the East and West. With the development of the western part of the United States it was inevitable that values would be compared. There would seem to be in this premise a lack of national consensus and, therefore, a fissure in the great myth which had previously covered the nation as a whole. Not so. Ultimately in this play, there is no such break in the bulwark of the work/morality myth, though a root-cause is invented for the myth.

The East and West are represented by Ruth Jordan and Stephen Ghent, respectively. Left alone in an Arizona

cabin, Ruth is confronted by drunken miners, one of them Stephen Ghent. Instead of raping her, as was intended, Ghent buys off the other men, and, in an act of love and compassion, extracts a promise from Ruth to marry him. Ghent is instantly reformed, shortly the richest miner in the Cordilleras, and promising Ruth a beautiful new home. Ruth, never at ease with Ghent, weaves baskets and handcrafts other trinkets which she sells secretly with the idea of repaying Ghent some day for the price of her earlier purchase. Money complicates matters more when it is found out that Philip, Ruth's brother, is bankrupt. Ruth runs away. Now home (back East), Ruth again meets Ghent who has followed her there. Ghent has saved Philip's business by buying up Philip's patents on the stock market. In the final scene Ruth is reconciled to Ghent, not on terms supposedly Eastern—established religious cleansing in the church—but on the only terms Ghent knows: leaving the past behind, which can not be atoned for, and living for the future. Though his mining enterprise is in jeopardy, he believes he can win it back with work.

Ghent's morality has been beyond question from the day he met Ruth and was transformed: ". . . because the first time our eyes met, they burned away all that was bad in our meeting."[4] From that moment on he is also prosperous. Moody attempts in his play to explore and compare two root causes for goodness, the established religious root and the natural religious root, the latter coming off decidedly superior. He has not, however, tampered in the least with the American myth, except to transplant it into new ground. Morality and success through dedication and work still win the day. Nor has he deflected in the least from the assumption about the self-made man, suggested in Manly and developed in Adam Trueman, only now the self-made man has a new home—not in the East but the West where he is nearer the soil— the East having become industrialized. Manly and Ghent are distant, if not kiss'n cousins.

Eugene O'Neill broke new ground in American theatre, but could not leave off plowing up the American myth. William Dean Howells, a born-again realist, had a personal hand in the development of O'Neill's early work, but Howells' theories about realism did not diminish, or critique, the myth about American success or morality.

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In his *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), O'Neill depicts two brothers with decidedly different, but natural, inclinations. There is Andrew the farmer, and Robert the adventurer (poetic soul). Supposing that he will marry Ruth and join his farm to hers, Andrew is prepared to be what he is naturally inclined to be. Plans are set for Robert to

leave with this uncle on a voyage to South America and other distant places. Love, however, a fatal cupidic flaw in the universe, intervenes, when Ruth is affianced to Robert. Plans are revised, the brothers exchange roles, and each does what the other is naturally inclined to do.

The results are pathetic, if not tragic. The farm goes to waste under Robert's inept management. And Andrew, who affected success as an adventuring farmer in Argentina, has really lost heavily on speculations. For eight years Robert, Andrew, and Ruth suffer, but all suffer nobly. As Robert lies dying, Andrew reappears. The origin of their ordeal is sorted out, and Andrew admits he needs "a rest, and the kind of rest I need is hard work in the open—just like I used to do in the old days."[5] Robert tells his brother, "You used to be a creator when you loved the farm. You and life were in harmonious partnership" (p. 976). In the morning Robert is found on the roadside, waiting for the sunrise. In death he has found the horizon he always longed for: "It's a free beginning—the start of my voyage! I've won to my trip—the right of release—beyond the horizon" (p. 978). In his last breath, Robert recommends Ruth to Andrew, "Andy! Remember Ruth—" (p. 978).

The morality of *Beyond the Horizon* is determined by two conditions: 1) by doing or not doing what natural inclinations dictate, and, 2) given a temporary reversal of the natural order, by coping personally and herorically with the reversal. Like Manly of *The Contrast*, endurance and even hardship and suffering are a way of atonement; and like Manly, such noble effort is promised success. The moral root of *Beyond the Horizon* lies, not in the Eastern established religion, but in the natural order, as suggested earlier by Moody's *The Great Divide*. The Puritan ethic, once religiously neutral, is now rooted firmly in the religion of naturalism, but the effect is the same: morality breeds success in the American myth. Andrew is rewarded with the farm, and Robert is free to explore beyond the horizon.

There is no conspicuous Manly in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939), but much of the play turns on questions of money and morality (or lack of it). In 150 years the Manly myth has survived, but with a sensational difference: we see what happens when the acquisitive side of the ethic requires inventing a morality to meet its proportions. The result is greed. Regina's words seem apropos: "The century's turning, the world is open."[6]

Curiously, the superstructure of *The Little Foxes*, its moral premise by which greed is measured, is found in the mouths of the secondary characters, and, as heard from them, it sounds much like the morality of Manly. Birdie Hubbard, the only remaining vestige of the aristocracy, objects to her husband's hunting and destroying the game, and letting the "niggers" starve. But her objections are feeble at best, smelling of alcohol at worst. Addie, a black servant, also a minor character, is the voice of the playwright: "Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then, there are people who stand around and watch them eat it" (p. 59). Neither Birdie nor Addie has the power to act. Alexandria, also a secondary character, in the final moments of the play, realizes what greed has done and promises to leave—hardly a response equal to the problem. Greed has all but silenced traditional morality.

Central to the action of *The Little Foxes* are the Hubbards: Ben, Oscar, and Regina. They are the new capitalists of the South who have superceded the

aristocracy, such as Birdie, and left in their financial wake only helpless, drowning voices. The landed gentry were unable to recover after the war "because," in Ben's words, "the Southern aristocrat can adapt himself to nothing" (p. 12). "Adaptation" is a euphemism for the new morality. By comparison, he says, "*Our* grandfather and our father learned the new ways and learned how to make them pay. They

Willy teaches his sons the American dream as it has come to him over the two centuries: how to steal from a construction supply depot, how to justify sleeping with a whore, how to lie when making application for work. The results are not pleasant to contemplate . . . . What Willy taught his boys is precisely what he had been led to believe about the American dream; now the American dream has proven to be a fake, and it has made tragic victims of Willy and his sons . . . . The Manly of 1787 has been strip-mined.

work" (12). "To make them pay" the Hubbards cheat each other and steal from a dying man; and by neglect Regina allows her husband to die of a heart attack to get his money.

Not a pretty picture, but exactly where the moral/success invention of Manly goes when allowed free, malignant growth. Now the end justifies the means, a new invention on an old morality, patently endorsed by appealing to God himself when Ben says, "God forgives those who invent what they need" (p. 16).

Echoes of the old morality have grown weak in Hellman's play, and more distant in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). And the separation between the vestiges of the old morality and the success formula of work grow wider. Willie Loman is a salesman, but his efforts win him neither respect nor enough money to pay off his mortgage. He prides himself in knowing the formula, especially as it worked for his brother, Ben. He tells the story of Ben; then his son, Happy, responds:

> Happy: Boy, someday I'd like to know how he did it?
> Willy: What's the mystery? The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it. Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich! The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress.[7]

Willy teaches his sons the American dream as it has come to him over the two centuries: how to steal from a construction supply depot, how to justify sleeping with a whore, how to lie when making application for work.

The results are not pleasant to contemplate. There is Biff who can not hold a job. He is a kleptomaniac and fantasizes about the West and the great out-doors. Hap imagines himself more than he is in the business world, claiming to be sales manager when in fact he is only a shipping clerk. What Willy taught his boys is precisely what he had been led to believe about the American dream; now the American dream has proven to be a fake, and it has made tragic victims of Willy and his sons. "You can't eat the orange and

throw the peel away" (p. 82), shouts Willy at his childish boss, not recognizing that he has described exactly what one does with both oranges and with employees within the system invented two centuries before. The Manly of 1787 has been strip-mined.

By 1972 the metaphor is changed, but the tragedy is no less evident, in Jason Miller's *That Championship Season.* Having gathered for a reunion and to plan political strategy for George Sikowski's mayoral election, four old basketball players try to relive the past. That past, specifically a championship season, is replete with all the cliches of the American myth. The Coach, also at the reunion, reminds the four players of their glorious past, quoting Teddy Roosevelt: "'Never settle for less than success.'"[8] Bits and pieces of their lives surface. There is their hatred of Jews and "niggers" (who are taking over the game). One of the four players is a strip miner and has been accused in the media of destroying the environment. Another is having an affair with George's wife. And another, Tom Daley, is an alcoholic. The Coach wants the flab off his men, but they are worn out; he says, "None of you can hold your liquor! Drink like women. You'll be squatting to . . . next" (p. 31). In a final scene, now drunk himself, the Coach says:

> There are no leaders, boys, all the great ones are in stone. Somebody has to lead the country back again. I'm talking about survival. All we have is ourselves, boys, and the race is to the quickest and this country is fighting for her life and we are the heart and we play to win! You won't lose, boys—because I won't let you lose. I'll whip your . . .to the bone, drive you into the ground. Your soul belongs to God, but your . . . belongs to me, remember that one, yes sir, we can do it, we are going to win because we can't lose, dare not lose, won't lose, lose is not in our vocabulary! (p. 47)

The rallying call of the Coach brings the group together for a final picture, huddled around the trophy. There is no moral hope or pride in the shabby group; there is only rhetoric from the Coach and feeble promises from the players—except from Tom who is so drunk that he can only muse on the strange word he heard in the reunion, "cunnilingus" (p. 48).

Colonel Manly has come a long way since 1787. He is hardly recognizable in Willy Loman and the Coach who may still be heard talking about the American dream, but tragically. The Manly invention of 1787 was a fake, and it took 200 years to find it out.

Notes

[1]Royall Tyler, *The Contrast*, in *Representative American Plays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), p. 56.

[2]Anna Cora Mowatt Richie, *Fashion*, in *Representative American Plays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), p. 290.

[3]James A. Herne, *Margaret Fleming*, in *Representative American Plays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 544.

[4]William Vaughan Moody, *The Great Divide*, in *American Drama*, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), p. 137.

[5]Eugene O'Neill, *Beyond the Horizon*, in *Representative American Plays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 974.

[6]Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1939), p. 76.

[7]Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1949), p. 4.

[8]Jason Miller, *That Championship Season* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1972), p. 13.