

## P R E F A C E



# Toward a Theatrics of Culture

The colonization of America by the English includes both a physical settling of the land and a rhetorical shaping of the experience of settlement. The process by which experience is re-experienced through the creation, transmission, and reading of texts is obviously a complex one. Writers respond to a variety of factors: their sense of a national identity, membership in a family or other subnational group, gender, education, religious background, economic status, individual identity, and the dominant rhetorical patterns of their perceived culture *at that time*. Add to that selective list, then, an encounter with a new land, and one has the beginnings of a reoriented discourse where experience is changed to match the old rhetoric or the rhetoric begins to change to frame the new conditions.

Theater is one of the rhetorical figures imported from England and used by colonists, and later by American-born writers, to express their version of life in the New World. What is meant by theater, however, is not always consistent from writer to writer or group to group, nor is consciousness of theater necessarily (in America) something that is universally held; but whatever social, religious, political, or even cultural differences may distinguish one American writer from another, theater grows out of the religiously dominated rhetoric of the seventeenth century into the politically dominated rhetoric of the eighteenth century as a common figure that expresses aspects of both life in general and the peculiarities of experience in what is now the United States.

Why theater? What conditions in American colonial life might induce a writer to think in terms of theatrical metaphor? Again, the reasons are various, but for the moment I will focus on two: the rhetorical traditions to which Anglo-American writers are heir and the social conditions created by the formation of towns and cities in a wilderness during the period 1607–1789. In the chapters that follow, I will look at texts as products of a rhetorical development that includes the history of theater metaphor in Western literature—and specifically, *theatrum mundi*, the world stage—as both a religious and a political trope. At the same time, I will consider the choice to use theatrical figures of speech as one made because of—or in spite of—the sociohistorical conditions that arise out of the conflicts engendered by American colonial settlement. In other words, that British Americans draw upon a tradition of stage metaphors is not in itself exceptional; however, for those writers committed to a special American status, whether as a separate polity or as the home of a transplanted European culture, the ways in which the figure of theater is applied show the differences between British and American to be more than just a matter of rhetoric.

In *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (1989), William Spengemann has rightly challenged the bases on which scholars declare that a literary artifact or an author is American or that American politics or culture has a peculiar history, unconnected to others. Too often, commentators on the American situation have imagined a culture springing *sui generis* from the land. Spengemann's criticism that scholars make too much of the difference between British and American authorship does not necessarily invalidate a doctrine of American exceptionalism; it does, however, force critics and historians to rethink the criteria by which they evaluate the claims for American specialness. With that caveat in mind, I suggest that the immigrant writers from England bring with them a rhetoric that allows "American" literature to mirror "British" but that over time, that rhetoric, measured by the gauge of theatrical metaphor, is transformed to meet the needs of a New World society whose crises mark out a corollary yet distinct history from that left behind in the Old World.

In fact, theater appears frequently in American writing as a meta-

phor for history itself, even while such usage reflects the rhetorical history of theater as a trope. As a result, I have structured this book with both histories in mind. In the Prologue, I offer a kind of narrative in reverse, a looking backward from recent history, as a way of showing that at least one set of issues faced by early American writers remains today—in particular, how a performance medium creates its own rhetoric, how that rhetoric can be adapted to new conditions, and how it guides people to think about their experience in new ways. In part 1, chapters 1–3, I take the opposite direction, tracing through example some of the rhetorical possibilities of *theatrum mundi* from Classical Greece to the European and English Renaissance. I include these excursions outside the title-page chronology in order to minimize the distortion of looking at American usage in a vacuum, especially when the argument supports an exceptionalist reading of American texts. After all, most literate European colonists to the New World would have been exposed in some fashion to the image of the globe as a stage, although not necessarily to the one most of us know—Shakespeare’s in *As You Like It*. Beyond that, it is helpful to remind ourselves how pervasive and how complex stage metaphors are, how the American colonist who might chance to employ one draws on a many-threaded history of usage that reflects not only the writer’s own age but also earlier attempts to render the world in theatrical terms. Since America does not, as it were, enter the stage of this history immediately, I take the liberty of asking readers to include in this American story even Plato, a writer who understands earlier than most the tension that sometimes exists among theater, politics, and human relations to the divine—and who, as a consequence, anticipates the collocation of theater, revolution, and Providence that engulfs the American colonies in 1776.

Chapter 4 marks a transition from European traditions to American ones. There, I look at Captain John Smith as a writer who, when he leaves Europe for America and later when he tries to explain America to Europe, not only renders his experience in the terms of an Elizabethan convention, the figural stage, but does so in the context of seeing the real stage as a rival to the global theater on which he acts. This rivalry then becomes a theme in the remaining parts, which focus on the American story. In chapters 5–7, I examine Puritan New

England, and especially Cotton Mather, its most prolific and stage-minded minister, in order to account for the persistence of theatrical metaphors in a culture that condemns the theater but is physically removed from one. Chapters 8–10 take up the eighteenth century and the pre-Revolutionary struggle, identifying, particularly in the writings of John Adams, what seems to be a growing self-consciousness about the application of theatrical tropes to the political struggles with England. The last chapters examine the war, its aftermath, and the growth of republican rhetoric as writers turn to the theater in both trope and play to celebrate the new political order. In the Epilogue, I recapitulate some of the argument and suggest possibilities for further connection between past and present usage.

Essentially, I wish to look at a historically limited, primarily literary issue—the appearance of theatrical figures of speech in early American writing—in the context not only of Western rhetoric but also of an ongoing process in American culture, namely, how a class of metaphors both shapes and reflects the development of what might be termed a national-self identity: the nation defined in a self, as Smith, Mather, and Adams all manifest. Though what I have to say is grounded specifically in the American example and what I propose has much to do with the peculiar circumstances of American cultural development, I hope that the terms of analysis will have some application outside the borders of American literature or any of the disciplines that define themselves as having an American emphasis. Therefore, I intend this preface to an American study to serve also as a prolegomenon to some future, more fully developed theoretical statement of how it is that cultures can be scrutinized through the figure of the stage—a theatrics of culture.

Literary critics and historians have traditionally examined theater metaphor as an essentially literary choice, made in the context of other (usually belletristic) writers who decide on tropes for philological reasons. In recent years, however, the cross-fertilization between anthropology and literary study has made it possible for us to see a writer's choices in terms other than simply "literary" ones. Thus, from the work of such people as literary theorist Kenneth Burke, sociologists Erving Goffman and Kai Erikson, philosopher Bruce Wilshire, social

historian Richard Sennett, and anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, we can begin to look at texts as reflecting the dramatic and theatrical conditions of specifically (or generally) demarcated aspects of cultural life. To some extent, then, figural theater does not depend entirely on the presence of an active institution of theater for its usage—though ultimately, of course, the reading of a particular histrionic trope depends upon the reader's understanding of basic theatrical conventions.

Where that understanding comes from, of course, is an open question. Turner, in applying the term *social drama* to crises in both preindustrial and industrial societies, sees drama as an underlying form of human response; that is, the modern stage as we understand it is a reflection of a pretheatrical need to shape mundane life in extraordinary ways. Others, like Geertz, argue for a more limited but deeper symbolic reading of anthropological evidence, choosing to see theater in certain rituals or cultural activities (as in the political spectacles of nineteenth-century Bali or Balinese cockfights). In any event, there is an extraordinary divergence among social scientists about the nature of theater and society, from the broad notion that self is found by casting off masks (Goffman) to nearly the opposite idea, that self is expressed only through playing roles (Wilshire). Society, then, can be viewed as a constant performance, a kind of ever-present aestheticized metatheater, that forces all people as role-players into the roles, ironically, of perpetual spectators, evaluating the performances of themselves and others. At some point, however, this kind of analysis, if allowed to become all-inclusive, breaks down into absurdity. On the one hand, Richard Sennett shows that the conditions of eighteenth-century urban England inspire writers to remark self-consciously about role-playing and spectating, making theater a valuable tool of cultural analysis; on the other hand, as Bruce Wilshire demonstrates in his criticism of Erving Goffman's work, theater has limits as a metaphor if it is to have any meaning at all.

Jean-Christophe Agnew, in examining the relationship of theater to changing concepts of the marketplace in Renaissance England (and later, in America), strikes, I think, the right note and one that I have followed here: "The meaning of the theatrical perspective is neither as timeless as its principal metaphor nor as timely as its current sociologi-

cal embodiment in role theory” (16). That is, theater as a figure has greater relevance in certain historical periods than in others in the same way that—again, if it is to have any meaning—it accurately describes social phenomena only under certain specialized conditions; or else it may be, as Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, that theater and society change their metaphorical relationship constantly over time. By analyzing texts, one can observe when the writers themselves show cognizance of the theaterlike aspects of life—and therefore postulate how the rhetorical use of theater functions as a way of making sense in a discordant world.

To avoid the dangers of seeing theater in all things, I have for the most part restricted the perspective here to applications of theatrical language to the world at large or to America in particular. I am less concerned with the theater itself (after all, there is not much to speak of in America until the mid-eighteenth century) than with its figures of speech; even so, some plays will be looked at later. Further, I have chosen to examine theater largely as an expression of group needs (or the needs of a self who stands for a group) rather than individual or private identity, though the two often overlap; in other words, theater emerges in American usage as a metaphor largely for conveying covenantal goals (in the case of the Puritans) or political ends (in the case of the Revolutionists) rather than the boundaries of private selfhood. The sorts of endless self-mirroring or intricate relationships of self and theater that one finds in a play like *Hamlet* or in the writings of a protean Renaissance Englishman like Thomas More (as analyzed, for example, in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*) do not, as a rule, show up in early American writing.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say there are not subtleties and shades of meaning to be considered; but in American public language, even the private language of public persons (one inscribed by people who are more aware of themselves as

1. One possible exception might be Benjamin Franklin. As Mitchell Breitwieser points out in *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality* (1984), Franklin is a subtle fry when it comes to the question of selfhood. But as a writer of prose, the printer-inventor-politician-author does not use theatrical tropes very often; and while one might say, as David Leverenz and Mark Patterson do, that Franklin is a theatrical personality, self-consciously adopting roles, he does not refer to himself, in the *Autobiography* at least, in the specific language of the stage.

ministers or housewives or lawyers than as writers), theatrical figures most often appear to serve the purpose of defining life, the world, the country, or institutions.

There is a basic difference, too, between *theatricality* as a generalized critical term for modern commentators and *theater* incorporated as an explicit figure of speech. The two cannot be entirely separated; as one can observe from reading Kenneth Silverman's and Peter Shaw's studies of Revolutionary culture, the increased frequency of the use of theatrical tropes during the Revolution has something to do with the crises and theatricalized events taking place in the streets and courts and meetinghouses and even fields of eighteenth-century America.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Rhys Isaac has essentially shown in his study of colonial Virginia, the analogies to theater presented by the rituals of planter, yeoman, and slave life cannot be ignored just because the surviving texts do not always express things in ways an ethnographer two centuries later may find to be significant. Isaac admits that the particular "episodes" he examines are portrayed as if "displayed in a theater." But like Agnew he makes this qualification: "Yet it is not to be supposed that the writer mistakes the world for a stage. Limited aspects of life may be illuminated, but the whole . . . can never be summed up in any interpretative scheme" (*Transformation*, 326). The world

2. Two works that have helped me see more clearly the pervasiveness of theater during the Revolution and to which I will refer more frequently later are Silverman's *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (1976) and Shaw's *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (1981). Silverman discusses theater as one of the arts whose importance grew during the Revolutionary period, and in that context, he sees the Stamp Act protests, for example, as opportunities for "testing out new possibilities of conduct"—in other words, for trying out new roles at a time when an "air of theatricalism" prevailed (82). For his part, Shaw sees the antimonarchical demonstrations that lead to the Revolution as forms of folk theater, enactments of mock parricide rituals designed to kill off the old father-king and allow the American son to achieve independence. I see my discussion as embracing both perspectives but putting things in a different context. Theater during the Revolution cannot be entirely divorced from plays or folk acts, but it also has a life outside both art and ritual. What I wish to assert is a more inclusive notion that sees theater as a historically derived rhetoric—one that sometimes expresses itself in written drama, at other times in popular street protests, but that *figurally taken* needs neither play nor demonstration in order to sway thought and action.

can still be called a stage, but it makes more sense to speak of it that way when conditions bring participants in a literate culture to see it as such. Thus, theater as an institution, as a literary figure, or as a tool for social or anthropological analysis has its separate spheres, but at times they must necessarily conflate.

For the point is, finally, that many early Americans use theater not simply as a rhetorical nicety but often as a trope deeply reflective of America's *place*—and the spatial meaning is intended—in history. Americans share with British writers a common language of stage, actor, play, and mask; but by the late eighteenth century, that language often separates British and American interests. For the British, as well as for their Anglicized sympathizers in the colonies, *theater* serves as a metaphor that illuminates the play sphere of life; the figure highlights a performative rhetoric that befits an urbanized, leisured class, aware of themselves and each other as sharing in a play of society—and aware of outsiders, including Yankee bumpkins, as acting in a different, lesser performance, gathered largely, like the mechanicals at court in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the amusement of the British aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.

The Americans, I will argue, develop in the spaces left by a largely, though not entirely, stageless culture an ideology of theater that carries with it the weight of history and cosmology. In essence, this figural theater amounts to the continuation of conventional classical and Renaissance *theatrum mundi* tropes but with the qualification that America is a special case, a special stage in the theater of the world; at the same time, this idea of theater becomes an ideology when it is expressed as a theater of Providence. This theater amounts to a tacit or overt rejection of the performative rhetoric, the aesthetically self-aware playing of social roles, that characterizes urban British society. The Revolution, then, is fought on two stages or two ideas of stage: one is play, one serious; one social, one historical-political; one reductive, one amplifying. The Revolution may well have been caused as much by rhetoric as anything else; but that rhetoric, whether it uses Calvinist echoes or Whiggish buzzwords, reflects some theatrical urge that has been present in American literature since its origins. What follows is a way of accounting for those times when theater appears, or erupts, as a trope in early American writing—and why it is that victory in a revolution has been encoded in the American rhetoric of theater from the start.