Cato: America’s Founding Tragedy
By Dylan L. Welker

In eighteenth-century England, theatre consisted primarily of imitations of the neoclassical style and revivals of Elizabethan plays, and audiences barely tolerated new plays for more than a week. Despite this harsh climate for new work, one playwright managed to achieve a magnificent feat by composing a drama that reached a height of popularity that was unheard of in its day. Joseph Addison’s *Cato, a Tragedy* may be one of the most successful plays in the history of the theatre, but only a small handful of theatre scholars have ever heard its name. While Addison’s forgotten *Cato* suffers from over two-hundred years of negative dramatic criticism and widespread neglect, the play possesses momentous historical value and demonstrates the impact theatre can have on society. This is primarily substantiated by its undeniable presence and popularity across the Atlantic where it inspired and emboldened America’s founding generation as they prepared for a world-changing revolution. Addison’s *Cato* deserves attention and re-evaluation in the field of performing arts as well as a permanent residence in the canon of U.S. historical literature, because rarely does a dramatic work reflect and inspire history as Addison’s play has done.

*Cato*’s author, Joseph Addison, was a renowned British playwright, critic, dramatic theorist, and essayist who was a known advocate for traditional forms, the culture of politeness, learning, and sensibility (Henderson xv). His most significant literary contributions were his essays published in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*: two literary journals that sought to educate their readers on subjects of morality, decorum, and sophisticated culture. It was in these journals that Addison established himself as an important British author. However, he also wrote three
dramatic works: an opera, a comedy, and a tragedy. His opera, *Rosamund* (1707), and his comedy, *The Drummer* (1715), were both widely unsuccessful, while his tragedy, *Cato* (1713), became one of the most highly-acclaimed dramas of its time (Thompson 158). It received over thirty performances in its initial run (which was rather uncommon at the time), it saw many revivals, and even went on to receive international publishing in several countries. (Otten 134). Addison’s partiality for politeness and traditional forms worked well in his favor, because *Cato*’s unanimous public praise has often been attributed to its generalized political sentiments (Otten 134). The author manages to avoid harsh public criticism in a rather divisive era in English history by writing a play with relevant, timely lessons and philosophies that appealed to both factions of the British government. The play also maintains a neoclassical, five-act structure, and the lines are written in blank-verse, which was rather typical of the time, making the play accessible and recognizable for British audiences.

The play also owes a portion of its success to the popular subject material. British audiences would have already been very well-versed in the history of Cato the Younger (95-46 BCE) as he was greatly admired throughout Europe. This is due in large part to his famous biography in Plutarch’s *Lives* (Litto 449), in which his unswaying, impenetrable virtue and emblematic suicide are depicted in glowing detail. Addison’s play only expanded the iconic Roman’s influence since it portrays his final days in Tunisia, where he commands his dwindling forces in a final stand against the tyrannical Julius Caesar whose dictatorship threatens to bring about the end of the Roman Republic. While in Tunisia, Cato must make an impossible decision to either concede to Caesar’s inevitable victory or permit the impending slaughter of his beloved family and followers. In the meantime, Cato’s two sons vie for the love of a young woman while a Numidian prince seeks to obtain the hand of Cato’s daughter. The overwhelming desire to
pursue love in the midst of war becomes a primary conflict in the play, and each character must decide where his or her allegiances lie. What results is an in-depth meditation on morality and the importance of public versus private obligations, logic versus emotion, and liberty versus death. The general’s decision to fall on his own sword, thereby preserving the lives of his loved ones as well as his own liberty, increases his status as an icon of stoic virtue and free will.

Despite its widespread success throughout Europe, the play found its most captivated audience in the struggling, English-speaking colonies of North America. The play’s earliest recorded staging in the colonies was on November 11, 1735 in Charleston, South Carolina, and it quickly spread throughout the New World. The drama was revived in Charleston on November 18 and December 17, and then on September 10 of the following year, the Virginia Gazette announced, “This evening will be performed at the Theatre, by the young gentlemen of the College [of William and Mary], The Tragedy of 'Cato’” (Litto 436). The play received performances from Walter Murray and Thomas Keane starting on August 22, 1749, and it received performances from the famous Hallam Company, known for bringing professional theatre to the Americas, starting on November 6, 1754 due to high demand. The Hallam Company performed it more than once and even revived it twelve years later on April 16, 1766, a performance which may have been a timely response to Parliament’s repealing of the Stamp Act a month prior (Litto 439).

The play’s generalized political sentiments, strong sense of virtue, and celebrated title character were equally, if not more, appealing to colonial audiences. In his book, The Making of the American Theatre, Howard Taubman says of colonial America that, “To have any theatre at the outset meant a struggle against religious and moral scruples” (Taubman 27). The colonies were very particular and strict about the content of staged dramas, and Addison’s polite prose
landed with settlers on all fronts. In fact, there was even a Quaker from Burlington who quoted the play in 1748 while writing a letter pertaining to his recent marriage (Litto 436). Although the Puritans and Quakers despised the theatre, it appears some of them may have at least read Addison’s play. However, of Cato’s many fans, the most notable and prominent admirers were America’s founding fathers and mothers. In the foreword for a contemporary printing of the text, Forrest McDonald writes, “That most of the founding generation read it or saw it or both is unquestionable, and that it stuck in their memories is abundantly evident” (McDonald viii). McDonald goes on to discuss how Benjamin Franklin attempted to commit large passages of the text to memory, and then he, like many other scholars that have written about Cato, claims that few were as fond or passionate about Addison’s play as General George Washington.

Contrary to what some may believe, George Washington was a regular theatregoer. Taubman says, “All his life [Washington] was attached to the theatre” and there is a distinct possibility that Washington attended the Hallam Company’s first production, The Merchant of Venice, when he was only twenty-two years old (Taubman 35). However, Addison’s play had a peculiar influence on Washington’s conduct that has baffled historians (America’s Founding Drama). Washington saw something in Cato that he wanted to implement in himself. Cato was notorious for his steadfastness, his adherence to the stoic philosophy, his patriotism, and his immovable virtue. In Robert M. Otten’s biography of Joseph Addison’s life, he says that the central image of the play is, “The stern Cato, calm amid the tumult of civil war, whose virtue glows as a beacon to other men” (Otten 146). These same sentiments have been used to describe General Washington. Cato even received a revised epilogue by Johnathan Mitchell Sewall in 1778 in which Washington is compared to Cato while King George is named a “British Caesar” (See Figure 1).
Washington’s many speeches and letters have been known to contain quotes and ideologies from Addison’s text, and there is even a myth (substantiated only by a single letter from Colonel William Bradford, Jr. to his sister) that Washington had *Cato* illegally staged at Valley Forge in 1778 to boost troop morale (Harding). The reason it was illegal was because it would have surely occurred after the passing of the “Congressional resolution condemning stage performances as contrary to republican principles” (McDonald viii). Whether or not the illegal staging actually occurred will most likely remain a mystery, but Bryan writes “From the doxa of earlier historians, scholars have invented a narrative of performance and power, rebellion and nation-building. Indeed this narrative has become, for twentieth- and twenty-first century theatre and performance detectives, a femme fatale of astonishing allure” (1). This writer represents the many who doubt the legitimacy of Bradford’s claim about the performance, because there is no other evidence to suggest that the event may have occurred. Despite their well-founded doubt, the myth is so beguiling that many accept it as fact, and it has become tightly intertwined with the history of the play as well as the history of the nation.

Addison’s play contains imagery and sentiments that parallel the underlying philosophies of the American Revolution. In his essay, “Theatres of the American Revolution,” Randall Fuller references Bernard Bailyn who says, “The colonial narrative of national emancipation was increasingly evoked through a, ‘Catonic’ image’ that not only exalted republican virtue but proclaimed that death was more desirable than the tyranny of British taxation” (Fuller 132). There is a key moment in Addison’s play in which Cato, alone, is, “Sitting in a thoughtful posture: in his hand Plato’s Book on the Immortality of the Soul. A drawn sword on the table by him” (Addison 88). This powerful image requires some context: It is near the end of the play and Caesar’s troops are closing in on Cato’s camp. Cato knows that he cannot succeed in battle, but
he does not wish to surrender and become a slave of Caesar’s tyranny. He wishes to die with his beloved Republic and uses Plato’s *Phaedo* to comfort himself, but still experiences an, “Inward horror of falling into nought” (Addison 88). While the play was initially written for British audiences, the founding generation perceived strong parallels between Cato’s predicament and their own. Plato’s *Phaedo* and the talk of afterlife adheres to the colonists’ Christian values, and their hatred for the British Empire makes Caesar’s inevitable victory an intolerable thing. Cato’s willingness to commit suicide (a final act of Stoicism that gives him control over his own fate) rather than surrender to tyranny was something the founding generation drew inspiration from.

Later on in his essay, Fuller writes, “Addison’s Cato would become in turn a particularly useful document for colonial leaders now attempting—and in the spring of 1778, apparently succeeding—to entertain aspirations of American triumph” (Fuller 137). Throughout the Revolutionary Era, there are lines, phrases, and ideologies from the play that seep into some of the most important letters, speeches, and literature of the Revolution, thereby proving just how closely Cato’s values adhere to the values of the founding generation. For example, there is a strong parallel between Patrick Henry’s famous quote, “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!” and Cato’s line from Act II, Scene I in which he declares, “It is not now a time to talk of aught but chains or conquest, liberty or death” (Addison 44). Also, Cato’s line in Act IV, Scene III, “What pity is it that we can die but once to serve our country” (Addison 84) almost perfectly matches Nathan Hale’s, “I only regret I have but one life to give for my country” (America’s Founding Drama). Even prior to the war, *Cato* had become a tool of rebellion as early as September 1752 when a line was quoted in an article that denounced British tyranny (Litto 441). Washington, in his mythical production of
Cato at Valley Forge but also in numerous speeches, was said to have, “Intended for his men to see their own impending battles as imitating the virtuous struggle of Cato, although presumably with a different outcome. But he may also have meant to impart to them that, even if they should lose, they must preserve their honor intact and never submit to British tyranny even at the cost of their lives” (America’s Founding Drama). Addison’s play was undeniably a tool of inspiration throughout the Revolutionary War.

The question, then, is how could a dramatic work with such a prolific reputation and significant role in history fall into such obscurity? Despite Cato’s international fame, wide public acclaim, and historical significance, the text’s reputation has sharply declined and very few people today have heard its name. One major reason for the play’s decrease in popularity is negative dramatic criticism. Even in Addison’s day, the play was hailed by massive public audiences, but the critics generally did not care for it. In her essay, “Reconsiderations of Addison’s Cato,” Leslie Radford states, “Critics began their attacks, beginning with John Dennis three months after the play’s premiere, and continuing through the present day. By the nineteenth century, the critics had won the day: they routinely dismiss Cato as inaccessible, passionless, and unsatisfying, pointing to structural shortcomings and simplistic characters” (Radford 32). This negative dramatic criticism has kept the play far from modern academia, and one writer even said, “Most historians of drama regard Cato as a museum piece and shudder at the thought that anyone would ever put it on the stage” (Otten 141). In addition to harsh criticism, the play lost a great deal of momentum after the Revolutionary War. While documentation of the play’s post-war career is scarce, it is likely that the powerful imagery and striking parallels lost their relevance after the United States won its independence. The play received a number of revivals after the U.S. victory, but disappeared altogether from the pages of history by 1850. The lost
relevance, negative dramatic criticism, and also the advent of realism and a need for a new artistic voice for the U.S. most likely destroyed the play’s reputation.

Joseph Addison composed one of the most acclaimed dramas of his time, which inspired some of the most important figures in American history while receiving an unprecedented number of revivals over the course of an entire century. While the characters may be simplistic, and the play itself may suffer from a great deal of flaws, there is still a case to be made for its reintroduction into the annals of American history as well theatre history, because rarely does a play maintain such a high rate of success over the course of one decade, let alone ten. Leslie Radford concludes her essay by asserting, “The play’s popular, decades-long success begs for the play’s re-evaluation, in spite of critics then and since. The re-evaluation demonstrates that the play uses a proven dramatic structure and that its ideas are enduring” (Radford 40). From Addison’s *Cato*, theatre historians can analyze a text that became an international phenomenon in an era that preceded globalization, U.S. historians can analyze a text that paralleled and inspired the thoughts and philosophies of the nation’s founders, and, even if the play is never performed again, it is an overwhelming reminder that drama has its place in human society. *Cato’s* history is tightly intertwined with the birth of the American nation, and that says a great deal about the necessity, merit, and worth of the arts.
A new Epilogue to CATO,
Spoken at a late Performance of that TRAGEDY.

YOU see Mankind in the same age!
Rise to your noble voice, for Liberty & nation.

Our British Cæsar too, has done the same,
And doomed this Age to everlasting fame.

The fame of Britain's in full martial bloom,
In one red year, sent headed to the Tomb!

Without the Senate, noble Briton's approve.

The mighty torrent! signified their foes.

And boldly arm the virtuous few—alas dare
The desolate period of unequal war!

Our Senate too, the same bold deed has done,
And Cato's seat is WASHINGTON!

A Chief in all the ways of battle bold.
Great in the Council—glorious in the Field.

Thy courage, O BRITAIN! and COLUMBUS's boat!

The dread and admiration of all land.
Whole martial Arm, and fiery soul, alone,
Have made thy Legions shake, thy Navy quail.

And thy proud Empire totter to the ground.

What shall Thou, O! what shall Thou ever be,
And Death the last of thy Chief, but Thee!

We've had our DECLARO ion, and HOPE can fray
Health, and Culture, peace—GOD bless AMERICA!

Yet brings destruction, for the Olive wreathe:
For health, contiguity—and for passion—death.

In FRANKLIN, and in generous DEAN thine forth

And Marcus blazes forth in SULLIVAN!

As Poyntz—WARREN fell in martial pride.
And great MONTGOMERY like Stigdy d'y

In GREEN, the Patriot, Hero, Friend, we see,
And Lucius, Ture, Cats, thine in Thee!

When Rome received her last decisive blow,
Had thou, immortal GATES! been Cæsar's foe,
All-perfect disciplin had check'd his breast.

And thy superb conquest won the day!

BRITTANIA had triumph'd on Pharsalian ground,
Nor SARCOPHAGUS's heights been more renown'd!

Long as heroic deeds the soul inflame,
Real calm hath STARK, will ever claim,
Who led thy way, and gave thee half thy fame!

See perseverance ARNOLD proofs daily

Canada is Alpines—second HANNAH's
to Cato's days, had such a daring mind,
With Washington's splendor been blend.

The Tyrant then had yield'd—great Cats E'ryd,
And Rome, in all her majesty, surviv'd!

What pride, what gratitude, are due to Thee,
Oh brave, experienced, all-accomplish'd LEE,

Who raised, the pen, Thou dost not at princely yields.

And while Simplicis' bellowings run the Ear,
End the TAYLOR CHURCH—his thunder bear
But all is false and hollow ----like the Fiend

Who made the Pandemonian regions rend

To give the tyrant Syphax may advance,
And AFRICAN liberty to FRANCE.
How long delayed by mere empty fears.

Will ye dream on, nor seize the golden NOW?
In vain do ye rely on foreign aid,

—is her own COLUMBIA must be freed—

And then my Countrymen! for fight prepare,

Glud on your swords, and焦速 sulth to war!
Works Cited


“America’s Founding Drama.” *The Lehrman Institute*,


