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WHEN THE TRAGIC HERO SURVIVES; OR, THE STRANGE CASE OF PONTIAC IN ROBERT ROGERS'S *PONTEACH* (1766)

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ABSTRACT: *PONTEACH: or, The Savages of America: A Tragedy* (1766) is the first substantially interesting play ever written by an English-speaking American. Major Robert Rogers probably wrote it together with his secretary Nathaniel Potter (a defrocked Massachusetts minister), while they stayed in London in 1765. The printed version did not meet London expectations, and the play was never performed. My aim in this analysis is to show how the convention-breaking survival of the tragic hero Ponteach inside the play prepares a future cooperation outside the play by Rogers himself with the historical Ottawa chief Pontiac, whom he knew personally and on whom the "savage" hero Ponteach is modelled. Rogers intended to present himself to the English colonial rulers in London as an expert on the American West and to advance his own chances of profiting from the future Indian trade in the First British Empire's growing American West.
RESUMEN: *PONTEACH: or, The Savages of America: A Tragedy* (1766) es la primera obra teatral sustancialmente interesante escrita por un estadounidense de habla inglesa. El mayor Robert Rogers probablemente la escribió junto con su secretario Nathaniel Potter (un ministro de Massachusetts expulsado de la Iglesia), durante su estancia en Londres en 1765. La versión impresa no satisfizo las expectativas londinenses, y la obra nunca llegó a representarse. Mi

objetivo en este análisis es mostrar cómo la supervivencia del héroe trágico Ponteach dentro de la obra, que rompe las convenciones, prepara una futura cooperación fuera de la obra por parte del propio Rogers con el jefe histórico ottawa Pontiac, a quien conocía personalmente y sobre el que se modela el héroe "salvaje" Ponteach. Rogers pretendía presentarse ante los gobernantes coloniales ingleses en Londres como un experto en el Oeste americano y avanzar sus propias posibilidades de beneficiarse del futuro comercio indio en el creciente Oeste americano del primer imperio británico.

This article deals with a colonial American drama that is probably the first substantially interesting play ever written by an English-speaking author. Still, Major Robert Rogers, who wrote it probably together with his personal secretary Nathaniel Potter, a defrocked Massachusetts minister, while they stayed in London in 1765, was not successful as a dramatist. The play, which was critical of the British colonists in the Great Lakes territory, was rejected by the contemporary drama critics and later ignored and forgotten by nationally defined literary histories because it is neither American, British, nor Canadian. Whereas I have already argued for resurrecting the literary reputation of *Ponteach: or, The Savages of America: A Tragedy* as a significant contribution to early English-American literary history,[1] my aim here is to discuss the particular logic of the ending of *Ponteach*, which breaks the conventions of tragedy and what this implies when the tragic hero survives after the play is over. In that sense, it is not "Game Over!" for the protagonist Ponteach, as the Madrid U.S. Drama and Theater conference theme insinuates, because his saga continues, and that beyond the play. As I try to demonstrate in this particular case, the very context of the inception of *Ponteach* was based on a plan by the author Robert Rogers to renew his relationship with the protagonist, modelled on the powerful Ottawa chief Pontiac, who had launched an uprising that led the British to the brink of losing their territory on the Great Lakes, newly acquired from the French.[2] Rogers's aim after the failure of "Pontiac's Rebellion" (known today as the Uprising of 1763) was to present himself as the Empire's expert on the other side of the Atlantic who had close ties with this still powerful Indian "King or Emperor" (*Concise Account*

[1] See my recent study, *Resurrecting the First Great American Play: Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit* (2020).
[2] For the most detailed biography of Pontiac available, see Peckham.

240)[3]—Pontiac was still alive at the time of the play's publication,[4]—and thus to advance his own chances of becoming a privileged business partner in the future Indian trade of the British Empire's growing American West.

From a theoretical point of view, this means that the dominant function of "replay" in this article is not merely hitting the "reset button" of a repeatable script that can be performed multiple times in different variations like a computer game: when the tragedy of *Ponteach* is over, the new game of doing business with Pontiac is expected to happen in a historical setting *outside the stage reality*. This manifests a crucial element of realism in this drama and the rare case of a playwright who happened to know the colonial world about which he writes. From a dramaturgical point of view, the survival of Rogers's tragic hero was a major breach of the conventions dominating the British stage at that period, where the hero of a tragedy by definition was supposed to be dead when the final curtain fell. *Ponteach* is thus not only the first interesting American play in English, but with its very particular "tragic" ending, it addresses the question of continuation in a different dimension. In that sense, the very flaw of the tragedy is motivated by a post-play breaching of what drama critics call the fourth wall. We have a case of a plot triggered by a collision of the worlds both outside and inside the play.

ROBERT ROGERS'S LIFE IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

In order to understand *Ponteach*'s aesthetic realism, it is crucial to know more about the life of Robert Rogers and the context of his several encounters with Pontiac. John Cuneo reports that Rogers grew up in a poor Scots-Irish immigrant family on the frontier in New Hampshire. After getting in trouble with the law when working with a counterfeiter, he joined the local militia and soon became a military hero in the conflicts with the French and the Abenaki Indians, who often returned to their old homes, attacking the new frontier farms. Rogers became a fixture in the London gazettes during the

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[3] The term is also used in the German translation of 1767, where "Ponteack" is encountered as the "König und Herr der Länder in denen ich wäre" and associated with a kind of "Kayserthum" (*Kurze Nachricht* 297-98). This shows that the Native chief was put on a level of possible negotiation with European potentates.
[4] Pontiac was murdered in 1769 near the French town of Cahokia—three years after the publication of *Ponteach*.

French and Indian War, and was even more famous than Benjamin Franklin (Ross 353) because of the successful guerilla fighting techniques of his green-clad Rangers with their *raquettes*, who would fight like their Native American enemies (Glover 180). Here is an example from the *London Chronicle*: "By an express from Fort Edward last Saturday night, we have an account, that Major Rogers was on his return from a great scout, with upwards of 300 men, that he has taken five prisoners and six scalps, and killed about 30 of the enemy; our loss, it is said, is three men killed, one Mohawk wounded, and about 14 men frost-bitten" (qtd. in Rogers, *Illustrated Journals* 157-58). Unlike the British redcoats, Rogers Rangers were American-born, native to the territory in which they were fighting, and wore green camouflage to better blend in with the surroundings. But Robert Rogers was never adequately reimbursed for his Ranger services and was continuously haunted by debts. As Norman Gelb writes, "Unable to resolve his difficulties, Rogers looked to London for respite and a change of circumstances. In 1765, he crossed the Atlantic in an attempt to exploit his fame, which had spread to England" (15). Nor did he get the military recognition from his British superiors for doing their dirty work. Thus the reason why Rogers went to London was to promote his own case to the very center of Imperial power.

In London, Rogers first published his *Journals of Major Robert Rogers* (1765) with J. Millan, a publisher specialized in militaria, and then his *Concise Account of North America* (1765), because he wanted to profit from the fact that there was so much interest in his heroic personality. It is in the latter book that Rogers describes his encounter with Pontiac and the Lake Indians:

> They are formed into a sort of empire, and the Emperor is elected from the eldest tribe, which is the Ottawawas, some of whom inhabit near our fort at Detroit, but are mostly further westward towards the Mississipi. Ponteack is their present King or Emperor, who has certainly the largest empire and greatest authority of any Indian Chief that has appeared on the continent since our acquaintance with it. He puts on an air of majesty and princely grandeur, and is greatly honoured and revered by his subjects. (239-40)[5]

Describing his now-famous personal encounter, Rogers writes: "In the year 1760, when I commanded and marched the first detachment into this country that was ever sent there by the English, I was met in my

[5] All quotations are in the original spelling and italics.

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way by an embassy from him. [...]. His ambassadors had also orders to inform me, that he was Ponteack, the King and Lord of the country I was in" (240). He continues: "At first salutation when we met, he demanded my business into his country, and how it happened that I dared to enter it without his leave? […] I informed him that it was not with any design against the Indians... [...]. I at the same time delivered him several friendly messages, or belts of wampum" (240-41). Pontiac also provided Rogers with provisions: "At our second meeting he gave me the pipe of peace and both of us by turns smoaked with it, and he assured me he had made peace with me and my detachment; that I might pass through his country unmolested, and relieve the French garrison; and that he would protect me and my party" (241).

Mural at Cuyahoga County Courthouse, Cleveland, Ohio: Interview between Captain Robert Rogers of the "Rogers Rangers" and the Indian Chief Pontiac by Charles Yardsley Turner, 1912.

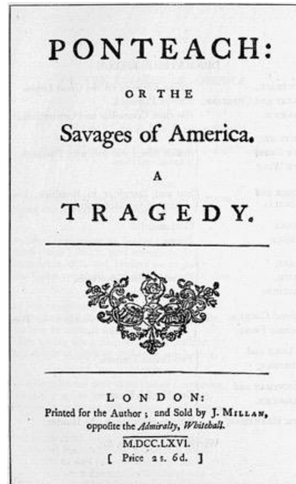
The reviews of *Concise Account of North America* were very positive, with one reviewer noting in *The Gentleman's Magazine* that the book was "very different from the compilations which are undertaken for booksellers, by persons wholly unacquainted with the subject" (584). The reviewer is especially interested in Rogers's reporting on "the interiour part of *America*": "This is a very entertaining as well as useful part of the work, for which the Major was particularly qualified, by a long and experimental acquaintance with their several tribes and nations, both in peace and war" (585). He concludes the

review by looking forward to a continuation of the account through subscription. Praise also came from the *Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature*: "The credibility of his [Rogers's] accounts […] rest upon the moral character of the author, of whose person we know nothing; tho' we are rather pre-possessed in his favour, by the air of openness with which he writes, unmixed with the marvelous" (387). Ominously, this reviewer goes on to suggest the following: "The picture which Mr. Rogers has exhibited of the emperor Ponteack, is new and curious, and his character would appear to vast advantage in the hands of a great dramatic genius" (387).

This last comment from the *Critical Review* is probably the very statement that motivated Rogers and his secretary Potter to write the play. The tall Ranger wanted to make his military successes also financially profitable and gather support at the Imperial capital for his many North American projects to foster his own career. Having seen so many less qualified military leaders and traders making their fortunes in the frontier trade made him feel that, as a man who knew more about Natives than the British competition, it should now be his turn to profit from the Western expansion of the British Empire to which he had himself substantially contributed. After all, it was he and his Rangers who had taken Detroit from the French (on the very expedition where he had first met Pontiac). As a consequence of the work, Rogers became an immediate celebrity in London; he attended many social events and was even received by King George III at St. James's Palace (Ross 364). His aim was to present himself as a man who had the right connections with the locals and could therefore better represent the Crown as a colonial business partner in the New World than the redcoat officers did. Rogers's lobbying was successful, and he received a governorship in Michilimackinac, a fort on the upper end of the Great Lakes, and even support for an expedition to find the long sought-after Northwest Passage.[6] When he traveled to the colonial outpost in 1766, the play *Ponteach* was about to be published.

[6] Always in need of money, Rogers wanted to get the £20,000 reward for finding the Northwest Passage, but the search headed by Captain Tute and Jonathan Carver failed. Carver's *Travels Through America, 1766-1768* (1788) is the best-known documentation of this expedition.

THE PUBLICATION HISTORY OF *PONTEACH*


PONTEACH:
OR THE
Savages of America.
A
TRAGEDY.
LONDON:
Printed for the Author; and Sold by J. MILLAN,
opposite the *Admiralty, Whitehall.*
M.DCC.LXVI.
[Price 2 s. 6d.]

Title page of the original edition of Ponteach (London 1766)

Ponteach was Rogers's third book, again published with J. Millan, and its plot must be seen with respect to the above context and as a part of the Major's career planning. As B. T. Barnum would later argue, all publicity is good publicity, and Rogers wanted to get attention for himself and his projects—even the theater would serve his ends. Though he may have seen plays in London, Rogers certainly needed help to write his own drama, as his education did not go beyond primary school training (Cuneo 6). It is thus generally agreed upon that his private secretary, Nathaniel Potter, who had a degree in theology from the College of New Jersey (nowadays Princeton University), must have helped the uneducated farmer–soldier write the blank verse.[7] Potter certainly knew more about the theater and its conventions than Rogers did, and the cooperation between these two unlikely figures may be the reason for many of the ideological incoherencies in *Ponteach*. As a result, we get a play that is written in traditional iambic pentameter, even rhyming in some of the important scene endings. Grafted onto the Native American protagonists are

[7] Nevins calls Potter "an educated and rather clever, but disreputable Englishman" (79).

European narratives, such as a love story between the children of different chiefs reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet (he Ottawa, traditionally allied with the French; she Mohawk, allied with the English), and an evil fratricide among Ponteach's sons, Chekitan and Philip, echoing Cain and Abel (but here the good son kills the evil one, who has murdered his fiancée Monelia, the Juliet figure). Similarly, we find alien references to a symbolic bestiary of non-American animals such as "tygers" and evil "vipers," as well as notions of royal lineage and inheritance that have little to do with Native American tribal politics. These projected elements seem forced. Since Rogers knew more about American culture and the landscape, he would not have penned these mistakes. They are very probably of Potter's making, whose education had exposed him to European conventions and must have impressed Rogers in turn.

At the same time, and in contrast, *Ponteach* is also full of accurate ethnographical and historical information about North America and its inhabitants, which puts this play high above the information level of any of its European stage competition at that time, be it Dryden's *Indian Emperour* (1665) or Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1696). Rogers had grown up in North America; he knew its landscapes, its animals and populations, as he demonstrates in the very successful *Concise Account*. Thus in the play we find Indian oratory and interesting references to Native history (e.g., the Delaware Prophet), Ponteach's inspiration from dreams, ethnographic details such as exchanging wampum, smoking the calumet and using a traditional sweat lodge, and finally even a spectacular war dance and a somber Indian funeral. The latter are of course over-theatricalized and add to the play's melodramatic stage attraction, but we do also get the main events of the Indian Uprising of 1763 referenced.

A further crucial realist element is, as already mentioned, the conventional paradox that the figure of Ponteach/Pontiac, the main protagonist in this "tragedy," survives at the end and closes the play with powerful words. We remember that Rogers had met the historical Pontiac twice before, first in a friendly encounter at Cuyahoga County in Indiana, and later during the defense of Detroit. They were men who knew each other and who respected one another on the battlefield. In short, despite the theatrical clichés that he (and his collaborator Potter) thought one owed to stage conventions, Rogers brings elements of genuine knowledge and realism to this play that were simply unheard of in the London theater scene of his days. In our case, this very element of historical realism is also a symptom of the play's

double function: one inside, where Ponteach is supposed to be a tragic hero (but does not die as he should, according to stage convention), and the other function outside, where the powerful Pontiac looms in the future as a possible business partner for the dramatist's post-drama career. The very tension between stage conventions (and even clichés) and the realistic elements in *Ponteach* thus defines the (supposedly) botched ending of this tragic play, which hails a new beginning outside after the curtain falls—in the world of colonial trade.

In short, the play *Ponteach* was part of a personal strategy by Rogers to build a reputation for himself in London. He wanted to present himself as someone who truly knew more about the Western part of the British Empire than those currently in charge, as a national hero who had won heroic battles in the French and Indian War and thus greatly contributed to this new expansion of British colonialism in North America, and as the expert on the local natives and their culture. He would therefore know how to negotiate and trade with the American Indians for the Empire. His three publications in London (there was even a German translation of the *Concise Account* in Göttingen) clearly gave proof of this. Moreover, Rogers also saw himself as a whistleblower. Passing over the hierarchy of his own colonial superiors, he went directly to London, describing the British traders as cheating the Indians with alcohol and manipulated scales (act 1, scene 1), the British hunters as murderers and stealers of fur (act1, scene 2), the British officers (with the allegorical names Colonel Cockum and Captain Frisk) as racists, haughtily underestimating Indian warfare and humiliating the Emperor Ponteach as "insolent" (act 1, scene 3), and even the British governors in Detroit, aptly named Sharpe, Gripe, and Catchum, as reveling in their own profits and keeping the King's gifts for themselves (act 1, scene 4). The very first act itself is thus a diplomatic bombshell, and the first two scenes were even reprinted as historical evidence in the original edition of Francis Parkman's highly influential *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1870).

THE FIRST BRITISH EMPIRE

This information inside the play has of course a lot to do with the colonial stakes outside the play, where the narrative was supposed to continue and have a favorable impact. Both Rogers and the English politicians thought that Pontiac would be a prospective partner of

great influence,[8] important for keeping Indian relations peaceful and for the future trade with the Western tribes in general. We can only understand the importance of this Western expansion/exploration when we understand that, before the American Revolution, what is nowadays Canada and the United States was all part of the quickly expanding British Empire. This "First British Empire" is precisely different from the "second" one because it still included a very substantial American wing that was ready for exploration, expansion, and new colonial trade, rivalling the entrepreneurial stakes in East India—it was a time when the Empire still had an Eastern and a Western wing. All of this new colonial business was equally promoted by the well-organized American colonials on the East Coast, who were not yet demanding independence but who already saw Western expansion as the boon that would later become Manifest Destiny under the flag of the United States.[9] Robert Rogers clearly saw himself in this mindset as well, and being well-connected and knowledgeable in and of the new territory, he wanted his share of the lucrative colonial rewards.[10] As Allen Nevins observes, "Again and again [Rogers] repeats, in effect, the declaration which follows the account in his *Journals* of the surrender of Montreal—that the wealth of the Incas and Aztecs was as nothing to that of the northern continent, and that the Anglo-Saxon peoples could not fail to find in it a home of wonderful scope and resource" (77-78).

Thus outside the play, as a governor at Michilimackinac—which was at that time the westernmost outpost of the British Empire—Rogers immediately set up business ties with local traders

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[8] This also shows in the fact that Pontiac was invited to the big peace conference at Fort Oswego in 1766, where he met Rogers (after the publication of *Ponteach*) for a third and last time. Cuneo writes that Rogers "met Pontiac en route [to Michilimackinac] easterly for a conference with Johnson at Oswego. 'We smoked a pipe together and drank a bottle of wine,' wrote Rogers to Johnson" (190).

[9] Volwiler reports on the "great struggle going on in London over the proposed establishment of [a new colony called] Vandalia" in Western Pennsylvania and West Virginia (294), and explains that "Most of the public men of the east were interested in this movement. All held shares in such companies" (234). He mentions major figures in American colonial politics, such as Washington, Franklin, [Sir William] Johnson, and Patrick Henry.

[10] Rogers's mindset is well expressed in a letter to his wife of 1765, addressed to "My only Life" and written "on Board the Ship" to London, in which he promises to lose no time "in Returning to my Dearest Betsy," dreams of buying her a harpsichord, and promises to "send you some pretty things from England fit for Ladeys" (Letter to his wife Betsy).

and organized the biggest peaceful assembly of different tribal nations that the colonized continent had ever seen. His main concern was to keep peace between the Algonquians of the Great Lakes and the Sioux of the Dakota territory in order to create a profitable business climate for colonial trade in the West. As he writes in his *Michillimackinac Journal*, another fascinating source on his life:[11]

> A grand … Council was Held outside the Fort at this were present the Chiefs of the Bay the Fallavines Puans Sakes Renards Soux, Chippewas Ottawas Messissagas
>
> The Matters of Complaint on either side & the Grand affair of Peace and War were briefly touched upon and Canvassed and after many Short Speeches Replys and Rejoinders of no great Consequence it appeared that there was a general disposition to peace and Amity prevailing among them which I had before recommended to them Separately—I lighted the Calumet or Pipe of Peace which was smoaked with the Formality usual on such occasions by the Chiefs of all the Tribes and Nations, who gave one another the strongest assurances of Friendship and Love, Promised to forgive and forget all past Injuries and Affronts, to keep down and restrain the Fire of their young Warriors and use their utmost endeavors to prevent mischief on all sides for the future and to live in Harmony Concord & good Agreement like Brethren and Children of the same Father, begging that they might all be Treated as Children in Common, have Traders sent amongst them and be Supplyed with necessary goods in their Several distant villages and Hunting Grounds which I assured them should be done. (36)

As John F. Ross concludes in *War on the Run: The Epic Story of Robert Rogers and the Conquest of America's First Frontier*: "Within a year Rogers had stabilized British relations with the Western Indians, which had been dangerously off balance since Pontiac's War" (392). All of this did, of course, incur great costs, which the new entrepreneur Rogers saw as a useful investment for future trade.

Keith Widder presents a 1767 map belonging to Major Robert Rogers in which the "district of Michilimackinac" encompasses "parts of the present Canadian provinces of Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, and the states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North and South Dakota, and parts of Indiana and Illinois" (*Beyond* xix-xxi). He writes that "Robert Rogers' most important goal at Michilimackinac in 1766 and 1767 was to convince the British

[11] The original manuscript of the American Antiquarian Society has been transcribed by William Clements.

government to create a new colony out of the 'District of Michilimackinac' and name him its governor" ("Maps" 36). Thus, in Rogers's *Michillimackinac Journal* we find the "following Plan" of a new colony in the Northwest, which he "humbly" submits "to the better Judgment, of his MAJESTY & the Government of Great BRITTAIN [...] especially at this Glorious period, of the Brittish Annals" (50):

> That Michillimackinac & its dependencies, shoud be erected onto a Civil Government; with a Governor, Lieutenant Governor, & a Council, of twelve; chose out of the Principal Merchants, that carry on this valuable branch of Trade with Power to enact, such Laws, as may be necessary & these to be transmitted, to the KING; & for Approbation: That the Governor should be Agent for the Indians & Commandant of the troops, that may be order'd to Garisson, the Fort who must not see a divided power, which the Savages laugh at & Contemon: and have Authority to leave the Lieut. Gov., his Deputy, when the service may, require him, to Visit the Indians at a distance. (50-51)

Rogers did of course insinuate that he himself would be the proper person to fill this position of governor, Indian agent and military commandant of what David Armour describes as his "dream of a vast interior colony" (4). To support this plan, he also launched an expedition to find the famed Northwest Passage. Jonathan Carver, whom he sent on this expedition, together with Captain Tute, explains in his famous book that the Northwest Passage is "a passage for conveying intelligence to China and the English settlements in the East Indies with greater expedition than a tedious voyage by the Cape of Good Hope or the Straights of Magellan will allow of" (58-59). Because they followed the Mississippi, Rogers's two explorers never found the passage, however,[12] but Carver is still known for his *Travels Through America* of 1788, in which he describes spending the winter with the Sioux Indians in the Dakotas and which has become a classic in the literature of Western exploration.

[12] Later in his life, Rogers proposed a new expedition up the Missouri River to find the Northwest Passage. This was more than thirty years before Lewis and Clark, but he could not finance it and therefore the glory of first crossing the continent would later go to the US Americans.

AN UNAPPRECIATED MESSAGE AND A CENTRIFUGAL CONCLUSION

These developments explain the unconventional plotting of Rogers's tragedy, and especially its paradoxically "untragic" end. To be sure, *Ponteach* correctly reports the failure of the Indian Uprising on the Great Lakes, which is historically accurate, and because the real-life Pontiac was still alive, Rogers shifts the tragic death experience from the play's eponymous protagonist Ponteach to the chief's two sons, Philip and Chekitan, and the latter's Mohawk love, Monelia. But significantly, the broken Ponteach of the last scene is still a powerful chief, and, like the British traders of this time, he will move further west, where (we can project) he will be available as a future business partner. What remains left for the mighty Ponteach to do in his final soliloquy in the concluding scene, interspersed with messages of the failure of the insurrection, is to give in to his fate and yield political power. "I am no more your Owner and your King" (V.v.93), he tells the beautiful land, and continues: "Ye fertile Fields and glad'ning Streams, adieu; Ye Fountains […], / Ye Shades […], / Ye groves …" (V.v.87-90). But—and this is, as already mentioned, one of the conventional flaws of the play—unlike the heroic role model Cato of Roman times immortalized by Joseph Addison in his genre-defining eponymous play, Rogers's tragic hero survives, and that with an "unconquer'd Mind" (V.v.95) which expresses itself in powerful blank verse interlaced with emphasizing rhymes:

> Yes, I will hence where there's no *British* Foe,
> And wait a Respite from this Storm of Woe;
> Beget more Sons, fresh Troops collect and arm,
> And other Schemes of future Greatness form;
> *Britons* may boast, the Gods may have their Will,
> *Ponteach* I am, and shall be *Ponteach* still. (V.v.97-102)

The plot of the tragedy thus remains open before the final curtain's descent. The play is not yet over, and the hero ominously ruminates about future things in the mythical West with ambiguous tautological troping in a verbal statement that chiastically evokes the vanquished chief's existence in the present as mirroring a future existence of himself held up with the rhyming power and a double emphasis of "will" and "still." This Indian hero gets in the last word, and he is the one still standing at the end. His availability, together

with a threatening pose, needs to be taken seriously, and it is the perfect moment of interference for our soldier–author, Robert Rogers, to move from playwright to co-protagonist, enter the field with his expertise on Native Americans, and offer his services to the Crown.

The unconventional ending of *Ponteach* begs the question about the outcome of such a future development. In the case of Rogers and Pontiac, we know that things did not turn out well. First was the failure of the play that he had left behind in London, to be published by J. Millan. The London critics tore it apart. For one thing, they did not like the mixing of pidgin and blank verse, as when the 1st Indian leaves out the copula ("So, what you trade with *Indians* here to-day?" [I.i.74]), or later observes: "No, *English* good. The *Frenchmen* give no Rum" (I.i.87). The other Native Americans speak a bit more grammatically, as evidenced when the 3rd Indian asks, "You, Mr. Englishman, have you got Rum?" (I.i.77), or when the 2nd Indian says: "Good Way enough; it makes one sharp and cunning" (I.i.83). Although we can notice today the racist stereotyping at play here, this kind of diction was certainly new and daring in English drama at that time. But in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of February 1766, we can read: "The dialogue, however adapted to the characters, is so much below the dignity of tragedy, that it cannot be read without disgust; *damning*, and *sinking*, and calling *bitch*, can scarcely be endured in any composition, much less in a composition of this kind" (90, emphasis in original).

The criticism was even stronger when it dealt with the content, noting that the "indignation which the reader feels at the villainies of our traders, hunters, officers, and governors" creates interest in the play but "is immediately destroyed, by representing *Ponteach* as equally cruel and perfidious" (90). The character of Philip in particular shocked the reviewer: "We are struck with horror at the project so diabolically cruel, but we abhor the projector yet more, when we find that *Monelia* is beloved by his brother *Chekitan*, with the utmost tenderness and ardour" (90). He summarizes: "All the personages of the play may be considered as devils incarnate, mutually employed in tormenting one another; as their character excite [sic] no kindness, their distress moves no pity." The reviewer is especially abhorred by "a scene in which *Indian* savages are represented as tossing the scalps of murdered *Englishman* from one to another" (90). This was neither the discourse nor the story line that polite London society would appreciate. Not even the gallant British rulers on the Great Lakes were

exempted from villainy—that was simply too much criticism of home at the home front.

The assessment of *Ponteach* by the *Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature* was negative as well: "Though we very readily embraced the opportunity of doing justice of the character of major Rogers, as an officer [with reference to their previous review published in November 1765], and an itinerant geographer, yet we can bestow no encomiums upon him as a poet. The performance before us is the most insipid and flat of any we have ever reviewed, belonging to the province of the drama" (150). Though possibly the most negative review was printed in the *Monthly Review, or Literary Journal*, which had previously welcomed the *Concise Account* and extensively quoted excerpts, but was now sarcastically calling the play

> one of the most absurd productions of the kind that we have seen. It is great pity that so great and judicious an officer should thus run the hazard of exposing himself to ridicule, by an unsuccessful attempt to entwine the poet's bays with the soldier's laurel. His journal, and account of our western acquisitions, were not foreign to his profession and opportunities; but in turning bard, and writing a tragedy, he makes just as good a figure as would a Grubstreet rhymester at the head of our Author's corps of North American Rangers. (242)

Obviously, Robert Rogers's play did not meet the expectations of the critics. Whether this was due to the play's questionable quality or because it did not meet the conventional expectations remains a matter of debate.[13] What I want to emphasize here is that it was his realism in particular that offended the London critics.

In the same way, Rogers's criticism of English colonial politics and the fact that the English protagonists were consistently evil in the story (except, maybe, for the Puritan wife of the hunter, Honnyman,

[13] I may add that this very negative assessment has been repeated by critics over the centuries. Here is Anderson's assessment from 1977: "Why the British and American public [...] failed to respond to *Ponteach* is not immediately clear. Certainly, the play is weak from an artistic point of view" (227). Nevins had earlier compared *Ponteach* to *The Prince of Parthia* (1767), observing that Thomas Godfrey's play, "beaten out in smooth blank verse, and with considerable merit of construction, [...] was much superior both poetically and dramatically to Rogers' work" (15). And R. E. Morsberger writes that the elements of the play that are not merely historical evidence, i.e., the love story and the conflict between the two sons, are "stilted and artificial, with the worst characteristics of elegant eighteenth-century tragedy" (245-46). He concludes that "Except for a few scenes, the play has almost no artistic value" (246).

who is horrified by her husband's murders) were not appreciated. To paint the local Indians as victims was not what an English audience expected or desired. Furthermore, the play is also curiously ambivalent about the French. Thus the French priest is a scheming and lusty Catholic hypocrite and a melodramatic character whom we love to hate. He suits the prejudiced expectations of a contemporary English theatre audience when he tries to rape the beautiful Monelia: "I have a dispensation from St. *Peter* / To quench the Fire of Love when it grows painful" (IV.ii.33-34). Notice how the vowels participate in the message, going from high /i/ to low /o/ ("dispensation") and another /o/ to high /i:/ again ("from St. *Peter*"). His constantly swearing by "St. *Peter*" is certainly ambivalent. The "it" growing here is the penis that associates with "*Peter*"—significantly, only Peter is italicized, not the Saint. By contrast, the French are generally praised by the Indians in the play as the better colonial administrators because they always had an ear for the *besoins* of the indigenous peoples. As Ponteach tells the English officers: "*Frenchman* would always hear an *Indian* speak, / And answer fair, and make good Promises" (I.iii.46-47). And later he tells the English governors, "Your Men make *Indians* drunk, and then they cheat 'em" (I.iv.79), adding: "We never thus were treated by the *French*" (I.iv.84). Such a narrative, of course, went entirely against the patriotic feelings in the Empire's capital, especially after the recent war against the French. It seemed to contradict the very logic of the colonial campaign—British audiences simply could not understand this point. All of this, then, can explain why *Ponteach* was rejected and never made it onto the stage. There is no evidence of a single performance of this extraordinary script.

We can parallel its fate with the final failure of Rogers's ambitious projects in Michilimackinac and the sad fate of his career. Not only was the search for the Northwest Passage a failure, but his debts caught up with him when Rogers borrowed money to build up good relations with the Indians. His colonial superiors, who strongly disliked the new competition in the Indian trade by an underclass upstart, had him arrested on trumped-up charges, jailed, and put on trial in Fort Niagara. Though Rogers was not convicted of any charges (see Ammons), his career as a Western commandant was over. His wife divorced him, he was still haunted by debts, and he was never able to relaunch his career. When he offered his services to General Washington in the Revolutionary War, he was arrested, escaped, and then decided to fight for the Loyalists. Losing the war, and all of his

possessions in America, he retired to London, where he soon died a disgruntled alcoholic.

We can summarize that in the case of Major Robert Rogers and his play *Ponteach*, even the open ending of this tragedy cannot disguise the lack of continuity, be it in the realm of staging and performance or in the wider world beyond the theater, in history, politics, business, where the hopeful Ranger met resistance that was beyond his own fighting capability as a soldier. As in the case of the historical Pontiac, for Rogers the playscript he had laid out for himself was over, and he could not restart his own game in real life. *Ponteach* is therefore a significant play *because* of its many unbalanced literary qualities, and it is a very rich aesthetic text because it carries within itself so many contradictions of its own time, its protagonists, and its authors. If we expect formal unity in this piece, we miss out in its strengths. We can rather see the text as a "centrifugal force" in the Bakhtian sense, that is, the "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (272), or simply "dialogized heteroglossia" (273). Its very richness consists in the incorporation and reflection of all of the antagonizing elements at its origin. A centrifugal language thus provides a realistic richness of contextualized incorporation which demands an aesthetics of appreciation that surpasses the glibness of a mere *pièce bien faite*.

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