On 14 April 1787, a small notice—thirty-eight words, no pictures—appeared on one of the inside pages of New York’s Daily Advertiser. This brief newspaper notice advertised the imminent performance of a new five-act comedy called The Contrast. It also informed readers that the playwright’s country of origin was clearly more significant than his specific identity, which the notice did not disclose. Some readers, however, already knew that the author was Royall Tyler, a visitor from Massachusetts. The premier of Tyler’s comedy, The Contrast, at New York’s only theater on 16 April, would be a notable occasion, the first professional production of a play written by an American.

The Contrast appealed to patriots and nationalists who championed the creation of a distinctive American culture, while addressing timely issues of critical importance to post-revolutionary Americans. As they fought for and won their independence from Great Britain, Americans embarked on a republican experiment that they believed would turn out fundamentally different from—and, in their view, superior to—European monarchies. As they did so, they pondered the sorts of manners, morals, education, and leadership that would be most compatible with their often conflicting interpretations of republican political values. A New England patriot, Royall Tyler wrote The Contrast in part to explore the much vaunted differences between republican simplicity and transparency, on the one hand, and European-style ostentation and duplicity, on the other, and to ask whether Americans’ rejection of monarchy in 1776 in truth necessitated the eradication of all European social forms. The Contrast is important not only as a “first” in United States literary history, but also as a barometer of this lively contemporary cultural dialog.

But today’s readers also will find timeless themes and issues in The Contrast, a comedy of manners in which the main characters are young
people. Sex, seduction, fashion, and amusement are at the center of the lives of these characters, whose stories Tyler dramatizes in order to prod his audience into thinking about the sorts of ideals and conduct Americans should value. So, too, is education a key theme in Tyler’s play as parents, books, and role models (both positive and negative) influence the conduct and demeanor of his characters. *The Contrast* also explores gender ideals, family relationships, courtship, and marriage, all of which are topics that are as relevant to modern readers as they were to post-revolutionary Americans.

This edition of *The Contrast* is based on that published in New York by the Dunlap Society in 1887, which, in turn, replicated the original Philadelphia edition of 1790. (Although Tyler wrote *The Contrast* in 1787, three years passed before the play appeared in print.) This present edition of Tyler’s text includes new annotation to enhance modern readers’ understanding of the play, as well as an introductory essay that situates the play in its proper historical context.

The book’s concluding section features pairs of contemporary documents that express divergent or opposing views on issues Tyler’s plays addresses: the appropriate uses of the arts, literature, and fashion in a republic; the respective attributes of ideal wives and husbands; the purpose of manners and education among a republican people; and the meaning of equality for post-revolutionary Americans. Finally, a brief bibliography offers readers suggestions for further reading on these and other related topics.

*The Contrast* is a lively introduction to New York’s social life in 1787 and, more generally, to a significant subset of the world the revolutionaries made. Happily, Deborah Gershenowitz, my superb editor at New York University Press, shares my sense of history and my sense of humor (this play is funny, too!); I am grateful for her wholehearted support for this project from the start. It was a pleasure working with Debbie and her colleagues at NYU, especially Salwa Jabado and Despina Gimbel. Norma Basch, Charlene Boyer Lewis, and Rosemarie Zagarri, the readers for NYU Press, also were enthusiastically supportive, and their suggestions for improving my proposal influenced (in good ways) the finished product. A book about fashion and manners must have pictures, and I thank the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for the subvention that paid for mine. Finally, and as always, I thank the guys—Tom, Zachary, and Anders—for letting me work, and also for all our great and small adventures.