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Susan Castillo

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'The Rising Glory of America'**

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Susan Castillo

Imperial Pasts and Dark Futurities: Freneau and Brackenridge's "The Rising Glory of America"

"The Rising Glory of America", a dramatic dialogue written by Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, was first read at the Princeton commencement ceremonies in 1771. In the wake of the Boston Massacre, Freneau and Brackenridge's poem caused a sensation, and on reading the poem it is easy to understand the reasons why. In the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence, the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) was a hotbed of Revolutionary sentiment. Intense rivalry existed between student political societies such as the American Whig Society, founded in 1769 by Philip Freneau, James Madison, and others, and its rival, the Clisosophical Society. The increasing politicisation of the College reflected the Whiggish attitudes of its President, John Witherspoon (himself an author of dramatic dialogues) who is said to have given at least tacit blessing to a nocturnal protest by students in 1770 (described in a letter by Madison) in which a letter urging merchants to ignore the Non-Importation Agreement of 1770 was intercepted and ceremonially burned by students dressed in black clothing manufactured in America, while the bells were tolled. The Class of 1771 included a future president, James Madison; Aaron Burr would graduate in the following year.¹

To say that the poem reflects the turbulent and often muddled times in which it was written is a considerable understatement. It is a complex and many-layered document, in which we can note not one but two authorial voices, which often coexist uneasily. In an article unravelling the contributions of

1. Cf. Philip Marsh, *Philip Freneau* (Minneapolis: Dillon Press, 1967), 13–26.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge. Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748 – 25 June 1816 / Kintyre, Scotland). Poet's Page.ÂBut come Leander since we know the past And present glory of this empire wide, What hinders to pervade with searching eye The mystic scenes of dark futurity? Say shall we ask what empires yet must rise What kingdoms pow'rs and states where now are seen But dreary wastes and awful solitude, Where melancholy sits with eye forlorn And hopes the day when Britain's sons shall spread Dominion to the north and south and west Far from th' Atlantic to Pacific shores? A glorious theme, but how shall mortals dare To pierce the mysteries of future days, And scenes unravel only known to fate Philip Freneau's "The Rising Glory of America" is an exciting poem, arguably the most important American poem of its age. Its composition is entangled in the historical events that created American independence, and it was written by a poet who (later) probably had more direct influence on the country's politics than any other poet in America's history. The poem articulates many of the formative myths in the cultural imagination that brought the American nation into being: the *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* ideas that resurfaced in the nineteenth century as "manifest destiny"; the co