The American constitution was drafted in 1776 when America declared its independence from British colonial rule. Whilst, in theory, providing liberty and happiness to all American citizens, the constitution refrain from including women as well as African and Native Americans in practising core American rights. Consequently, women were excluded from active participation in public affairs. However, this restriction did not prevent them from contributing outspokenly through other forms of communication, one of which was the dramatic literary genre. Apart from a select few, these female playwrights have largely been forgotten, erased from cultural memory as well as from academic history. Poole’s current research aims at remembering these forgotten women, as well as their male counterparts, who serve to provide a greater understanding of the theatrical cultural climate at large through reinstalling them in the historical accounts of the drama and theatre of the revolutionary era. This project is one of the first reconstructions of the history of North American dramatic writings of the 18th century from a gendered perspective.

The project is comprised of three sections, each of which focuses on a different historical period. These three sections are the colonial pre-revolutionary time with a focus on male homo-social relations and the use of comedy to negotiate these relationships (period case study 1), the revolutionary period 1775-1783 with a focus on Mercy Otis Warren and her contemporaries (period case study 2), and the post-revolutionary years of the early republic up until 1812 and its key comedicienne (period case study 3).

Throughout their work, Poole and his research team pay special attention to the various comic genres, based on the assumption that it is comedy, rather than tragedy, which makes the best and most productive platform of political discourse filtered through dramatic works, especially in the context of female playwrights. Interestingly, it seems that female more than male writers preferably turned to comic genres to gain public influence, which was otherwise prohibited by law and custom. It, therefore, was through comedy that women raised their voices, articulated their political opinion, helped shape the new republic, and sought to be remembered.

**PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FORCES AND HOMOSOCIAL DESIRES (PERIOD CASE STUDY 1)**

Despite substantial restrictions placed upon the theatre, particularly through the use of laws and censorship, there was a noticeable increase of dramatic activity in the period leading up to the American Revolution. Most of the plays at this time were political satires, often in the form of farcical dialogues, which argued both for and against the impending American independence. Drama thus served as public commentary, becoming bolder and more insistant in terms of both political content and aesthetic endeavour. These plays were written by both ministers and politicians and despite their political and cultural significance, have been largely overlooked by academics thus far. This has included a lack of interest in whether any of these plays were written by women and an exploration of the representations of homosexuality and same-sex desire. Research here seeks to examine the link between institutionalised homosexuality, particularly within educational and clerical institutions, and comic writings. Although the term homosexuality was not coined until the 19th century, academics have discovered that male-male relations prior to this time period were highly flexible. This case study thus highlights the importance of homosexuality as represented and performed through political farcical dialogues for the task of nation-building and the development of an American national identity.

The study of this time period includes written and sometimes published dramas by patriotic Americans which were not necessarily staged but were circulated and discussed amongst friends. One particularly important female voice of this time was Mercy Otis Warren, from Massachusetts, whose plays comprised immediate responses to current events and thus predominantly attacked the reigning Massachusetts government. Her work included both tragedies and satires and served to establish a new level of quality which helped to set the standard for subsequent writers. Warren’s satires contributed significantly to an extension of the range for heroic characterisation. In terms of gender, the minor female characters in her plays were significant for the development of the male hero as the fighter in the theatre of war. Warren’s work thus contributes to a shifted sense of
Comedy served to provide both models of individual behaviour and definitions of national identity, both of which were eminently gendered in their perspective.

Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) was one of the first American feminists and a great advocate of American theatre in the post-revolutionary era. Her dramatic works include the sentimentalist comedies The Medium; or, Virtue Triumphant (1785) and The Traveller Returned (1796).

Sarah Pogson (1774-1810), her comedy The Young Carolinians; or, Americans in Algiers (1793), is a Barbary captivity narrative from the perspective of a South Carolinian woman. Her earlier play The Female Enthusiast (1807) is about Charlotte Corday who assassinated the Jacobin revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat.

Comedy served to provide both models of individual behaviour and definitions of national identity, both of which were eminently gendered in their perspective. Two particularly important female playwrights during this time were Judith Sargent Murray and Susanna Haswell Rowson. However, other largely forgotten female writers such as Mary Carr and Sarah Pogson, also played a significant role in the production of dramatic literature at this time.

CONCLUSIONS

With the exception of Mercy Otis Warren, Judith Sargent Murray and Susanna Haswell Rowson, many female playwrights of the 18th century have been largely forgotten, both from cultural memory and academic history. However, a study of such women as well as their male counterparts provides an important insight into the American theatrical cultural climate at this time. By focusing on the emergence of American theatre during the nation’s most crucial period of consolidation, this research project seeks to unearth the shaping of a genuine American literary voice arising through the differentiation from European sources and by forging a national character via theatrical comedy.