

Benedict Arnold, Peggy Shippen & John Andre
A Look at The Tragic Hero vs The Treasonous Villain

By

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During war the decisions people make define who they are and how they are perceived and remembered. This was the case with Benedict Arnold and John André. Both men were spies trying to get information to the English about Washington's movements and how best to defeat the Americans. But after both Arnold and André's plot to hand West Point over to the British was discovered how they were remembered took on two very different paths. Arnold was considered a villain despite his heroism throughout the war and André was the tragic hero. What was it that differentiated these two men within the spy game that made them both guilty of treason but made one be embraced as a tragic hero and the other as a villain? Did the mindset of the time influence and shape the two reactions to these two men? And what role if any did Arnold's wife have in this decision to turn their back on their nation?

A Sign of the Times

In order to understand why both men were viewed so differently we need to understand the setting of the American Revolution in colonial America and the mindset of its people. After reading several books and articles about Benedict Arnold and John André it was clear that Benedict Arnold was viewed as a villain for reasons other than his act of treason. In his article titled "Benedict Arnold, John André, and his Three Yeoman Captors," Andy Trees stated that "the confusion about who Arnold really was and what his treason meant stemmed from a confusion about what it meant to be American."¹ Trees suggested that Americans had such a violent reaction to Arnold's betrayal because it hit very close to home and what most American's

¹ Andy Trees, "Benedict Arnold, John Andre, and his Three Yeoman Captors: A Sentimental Journey or American Virtue Defined," *Early American Literature* 35, no. 3 (2000): 247.

were grappling with themselves was their loyalty to a system wrought with problems that made it too easy to betray and would require self sacrifice to honor.²

Charles Royster explained this best in his article “The Nature of Treason: Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold,” where he stated that the American Revolution was a time when colonists were declaring their freedom from a tyrannical empire who considered its subjects secondary citizens.³ Initially colonists were very supportive of the war but as losses were sustained, supplies were running low and corruption on the rise support started to decline during the years 1778-1780.⁴ In his book *Benedict Arnold Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered*, James Kirby Martin corroborated this and stated that in addition to languishing support incompetent and corrupt leadership led to the decline of the mindset of the time and it was this decline in popular support and corruptness of Congress that compelled Benedict Arnold to betray his country.⁵

Royster explained that with this changed perception of the war it became a challenge to uphold the very value that Americans placed high importance on - their virtue. He explained that virtue was very important to the Americans and discussed how virtue epitomized and defined their role in fighting for independence. Royster stated that virtue was everything - it defined who you were as a citizen and meant in part that you had to defend your land by taking up arms and

² Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 248.

³ Charles Royster, “The Nature of Treason: Revolutionary Virtue and American Reactions to Benedict Arnold,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1979): 167.

⁴ Royster, “The Nature of Treason,” 177.

⁵ James Kirby Martin, *Benedict Arnold Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 5.

avoiding ease and sin. “When Americans declared their independence, they agreed that it could only survive if they maintained their virtue. They must choose voluntarily to sacrifice safety, ease, and self-interest in order to defend liberty. When liberty faced armed attack, virtue called citizens to become the defending soldier.”⁶ The very ideals that defined virtue were being challenged and it was a decline in virtue and increased self-interest that was becoming prevalent during this time as evidenced by rampant corruption and shady business deals. And it’s this decline in virtue and questionable ethical behavior that can help explain why there was such a violent reaction to Benedict Arnold’s treason. Arnold represented what a lot of the colonists at the time were thinking and feeling. He embodied their frustration, desperation and greed and when their “hero” was revealed as a traitor their violent reaction to his crime reflected their own guilt and Arnold became the outlet for those tensions.⁷

In stark contrast to how Arnold was perceived John André on the other hand was viewed very differently. Alexander Hamilton wrote about John André in a way that his actions as a spy were superseded by his noble and sensible character. As noted by Trees, Hamilton praised André and “expounded at length on André's many virtues, perhaps best captured under the rubric of ‘a becoming sensibility’ which was a crucial part of the eighteenth century mentalite for educated men and women.”⁸ In “The Artistic Spy: A Note on the Talents Of Major André,” Judithe Speidel described André as an “admirable character whose acts were inspired by loyalty to the king, not

⁶ Royster, “Nature of Treason,” 165.

⁷ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 248.

⁸ 251.

deceitfulness”⁹ and Trees described André as an educated gentleman who was innocent and had been tricked by the ‘selfish villain’ Arnold into doing something illegal.¹⁰ Based on these opinions and commonly held beliefs of what a gentleman should be André was seen as a tragic figure, a hero who died doing his duty for his country and for his King.

But André was not tricked and Arnold was not the greedy evil traitor everyone believed him to be. The *Spy Letters of the American Revolution* helped to detail what happened on that fateful day that André was captured and letters written by both Clinton and Arnold corroborate André’s account.¹¹ In addition the letters give valuable insight into the state of mind of Benedict Arnold at the time he decided to commit treason and his *Proclamation*, made after his defection, confirmed how disillusioned with the war he was and how corrupt he believed Congress had become.

And what about Peggy Shippen’s role in her husband’s act of treason? As Mark Jacob and Stephen Case pointed out in their book *Treacherous Beauty*, Peggy clearly was involved and may have been the catalyst since Arnold’s treason began very shortly after they were married and Arnold’s first communication was to John André, Peggy’s friend.¹² But a look at various articles and at Aaron Burrs Memoirs will provide evidence for and against her role.

⁹ Judithe Speidel, “The Artistic Spy: A Note on the Talents of Major John Andre,” *New York History* 68, no. 4 (1987): 405.

¹⁰ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 251.

¹¹ Winthrop Sargent, *The Life of Major John Andre, Adjutant-General of the British Army in America* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1871), 343.

¹² Mark Jacob and Stephen H. Chase, *Treacherous Beauty: Peggy Shippen, The Woman Behind Benedict Arnold’s Plot to Betray America* (Guilford CT: Lyons Press, 2012), 92-3.

I felt that this is a worthwhile topic to explore because the way Americans reacted and viewed each man is an example of what the predominating American mentality was at the time. By looking back maybe we could see things differently, and not be influenced by the tension, fears and frustrations of the time. Why was André remembered as a tragic hero? Was it because he upheld a moral code that was consistent with the current thinking of the time? And maybe we can acknowledge that other than a villainous traitor Benedict Arnold was a man who was living his life based on a moral code of honor, a man who gave his all in the fight for independence and ultimately a man who may have become so disillusioned with the war and all its corruption that he felt morally obligated to turn his back on a failing cause? And maybe Peggy would not have been so quickly overlooked as a possible co-conspirator to treason.

Benedict Arnold

Born for a curse to virtue and Mankind,
Earth's broadcast realms can't show so black a mind.
Night's sable veil your crimes can never hide
Each one's so great-they glut the historic tide.
Defunct-your memory will live
In all the glare that infamy can give.
Curses of ages will attend your name,
Traitors alone will glory in your shame.

Almighty justice sternly waits to roll
Rivers of sulphur on your traitorous soul.
Nature looks back, with conscious error sad,
On such a tainted blot that she has made,
Let Hell receive you rivetted in chains,
Damn'd to the hottest of its flames.¹³

¹³ Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Revolutionary Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1776-1800* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 85.

Benedict Arnold - A Curse to Virtue and Mankind?

Benedict Arnold V was born on January 14, 1741 in Norwich, CT to parents Captain Benedict IV and his wife Hannah. They were an upwardly mobile and well respected family. While growing up there were a series of experiences which helped shape Arnold's view of the world and helped develop the values Arnold would live by as an adult. As James Kirby Martin pointed out in *Benedict Arnold Revolutionary Hero: American Warrior Reconsidered*, these included the incessant warfare of the eighteenth century which helped to instill in Benedict "the advantages of belonging to the most powerful, enlightened and liberty loving empires in the world and enforced his "embryonic sense of his own Englishness;" the religious turmoil of the first Great Awakening which exposed Arnold to the belief in a vengeful and angry God that would "arbitrarily strike down innocents as a warning to others about the sinful nature of mankind" and witnessed "friends and neighbors who were contentious and vile with one another;" and the diphtheria epidemic that took the lives of three of his siblings which devastated his family and led to his father's alcoholism.¹⁴

It was his father's alcoholism and fall from grace within the community and his family's strict religious intolerances which deeply affected Arnold the most.¹⁵ Martin explained that Arnold grew up to have "an unsteady sense of self-esteem and a consuming desire to redeem his father's disgrace and family name" and he "would show little tolerance for those who expected complete obedience to their will." Arnold would "challenge arbitrary power wherever it lurked, especially when directed against his person, character, and reputation," and became "intolerant of

¹⁴ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 14-24.

¹⁵ 26.

anyone he deemed threatening, unjust, or repressive in any way.”¹⁶ Arnold vowed to become successful and make a name for himself to gain the honor and respect of those around him.

Martin explained that this “became a preeminent concern in his life.”¹⁷

Benedict Arnold’s upbringing and childhood experiences dictated how he lived his life, ran his business, behaved as a military commander and how he defended his honor. Despite Arnold’s family setbacks and lack of money he went on to become a successful merchant trader, earning a good living, marrying and having children and becoming a well respected citizen of New Haven, CT.¹⁸

As Arnold’s family life and business were flourishing a series of tax acts imposed by Britain to raise imperial revenues led to rising tensions and clashes between colonists and Crown officials. There was an increasing belief that American’s “fundamental liberties were at stake,” which was corroborated by Arnold when he expressed his concerns that “Americans would see themselves as poor and much oppressed as ever if they tamely gave up their liberties.”¹⁹ Organized colonial resistance started to rise, redcoat numbers increased and anti-imperial violence escalated leading to the formation of civilian military units.²⁰

In Arnold’s home of New Haven, CT officials established the Governor’s 2nd Company of Guards and as Willard Randall explained in his book *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Warrior*, they “voted Arnold as their Captain, the highest rank and prestigious position, because his

¹⁶ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 413 & 25.

¹⁷ 4.

¹⁸ William Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1990), 68.

¹⁹ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 68.

²⁰ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 56.

personal wealth, his reputation as a firm advocate of American Liberties and his high standing among New Haven's working people made him the logical choice to provide leadership."²¹

Arnold accepted and embraced his role in the defense of American rights even though it meant he had to make personal sacrifices and leave his family and thriving business but he did this because he felt that if he didn't the alternative "was to accept the looming prospect of political slavery."²²

Arnold quickly made a name for himself through his brave and cunning military tactics. Examples of his military accomplishments included his performance in taking and holding Fort Ticonderoga; leading a column and invading Canada to take Quebec City while suffering a serious leg wound; delaying the British advance on Lake Champlain; and Saratoga, his greatest victory which led to the French becoming American's first and most important ally, but also where he seriously re-injured his leg. These accomplishments made him an invaluable asset to the American cause.²³

No one could rebuke Arnold's military triumphs but it was in the political arena where his problems began. Martin explained that "advancement, whether in commerce or in making war, depended on gaining the favor of patrons which included showing deference toward one's superiors but Arnold fervently held to the gentlemen's code of honor, which required that he defend his reputation against those who willfully desecrated his good name."²⁴ He also stated that "Arnold had relied on the tools of confrontation and intimidation, not carefully reasoned

²¹ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 79.

²² Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 60.

²³ 65,151, 269, 369.

²⁴ xiii.

public debate and backroom bargaining...so he had not learned how important images and impressions were in the political arena in comparison to substantive accomplishments...nor had he acquired the all-important matter of effective political compromise”²⁵ So while Arnold was exemplary in his military prowess and intelligence he was politically naive. He could vehemently defend his good name but could not display deference toward those he did not believe had earned that right which led to the problems that Arnold would soon face as less competent men surpassed Arnold through promotions and others looked to take credit for his military successes, violating and challenging his honor.²⁶

Arnold’s military successes made him become the target of jealous backbiting criticism in Congress. Arnold was warned about these rising jealousies when Congressman Samuel Chase wrote Arnold while he was on Lake Champlain “warning him of jealous mediocrities and informed him that your best friends are not your countrymen.”²⁷ These jealousies led to several attempts to undermine Benedict Arnold’s heroism.

There were several important incidents in which Arnold’s character was criticized and accomplishments overlooked. The first occurred after Arnold had “pulled off a magnificent defense of Lake Champlain in 1776, and was publicly criticized and faulted by Gen. William Maxwell for wasting the naval fleet, calling Arnold ‘our evil genius to the north who has got us clear of all our fine fleet.’”²⁸ The second was when Arnold was passed over by Congress in Feb. 1777 for a very deserved promotion to Major General. The promotion was one that even

²⁵ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 80.

²⁶ xiii.

²⁷ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 285.

²⁸ 319.

Washington thought Arnold should have had and was a complete insult to Arnold's honor as lower ranked officials were promoted over him violating his belief that "promotions were a sign of community favor and should rightfully come as a reward for virtuous service."²⁹ Arnold was very upset and felt obligated to defend his personal honor by threatening to resign, which in the eighteenth century was expected if anyone had been passed over for promotion and was an accepted way of forcing resignations.³⁰ Martin pointed out that Arnold felt that "the person who will tamely condescend to give up his rights and hold a commission at the expense of his reputation I hold as a disgrace to the army."³¹ Congress responded to Arnold by declaring that, "if neglected officers complained about their sullied honor they should be disregarded as unworthy patriots" and that if the "resignation of officers if junior officers are preferred to them...if they have virtue they will continue with us...if not, their resignation will not hurt us."³² This insinuation that Benedict Arnold was an unworthy patriot who lacked virtue and was so easily replaced was another hard blow to his honor.

The third and most damning instance of dishonor was when Benedict Arnold, who "brought the victory at Saratoga by providing the field leadership in both battles leading the Americans to victory," was denied recognition for his heroics when Horatio Gates received public credit for the victory and was awarded a medal by Congress as the alleged "hero of

²⁹ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 309.

³⁰ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 320.

³¹ 329.

³² Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 307.

Saratoga”³³ As a result Benedict Arnold’s respect for members of Congress was again seriously challenged.

It was after his injury in Saratoga, while Arnold was recuperating in a military hospital for more than four months that he had time to reflect and as Martin stated had “rated himself naive and foolish for having so neglected his own interests while playing the part of a virtuous patriot.”³⁴ Arnold had not received the promotion he and others felt he deserved, he had sacrificed his own wealth and lucrative career in support of the American cause and he had to quietly accept Horatio Gates being given credit for the victory at Saratoga. This was his mindset when General Washington named him military commander of Philadelphia and where Arnold’s character and honor would again be challenged as he faced a potential court martial when eight counts of corruption were charged against him, both defaming his character and making him look bad in front of Peggy Shippen, the young Philadelphia socialite whom he had fallen in love with.³⁵

Arnold challenged Congress to support him against the charges, but they refused. Arnold’s growing dismay of Congress’s integrity was evident in a letter written by Arnold where he stated that he “considered Congress nothing more than a ‘body of men who seem to be governed by whim and caprice’ and that their actions had surprised and mortified him...the apparent whimsy of Congress would have disabling long-term effects on the war effort...that it betrays want of judgement and weakness to appoint officers and break, or displace them, on

³³ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 407.

³⁴ 429.

³⁵ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 443.

trifling occasions.”³⁶ Arnold was eventually acquitted of six of the eight charges brought against him and had to be reprimanded by George Washington.³⁷ Arnold was now convinced of Congress’s corruption and became resolute in his disillusion about what he felt had once been a just and noble cause.

After having been unjustly criticized and characterized, demoted, and not getting the recognition he deserved for valiant and courageous behavior on the battle field Arnold and the attack on his honor had reached a breaking point. As Martin explained Arnold had become a “troubled officer who felt deeply betrayed by the cause he had so eagerly tried to serve...one that had left him lame and nearly lifeless, compromised in sacred honor and debilitated in personal fortune.”³⁸ Martin explained that Arnold had sacrificed everything for his country but “too many false patriots had unfairly maligned him-and his good name and had made a mockery of the Revolution and its high ideals.”³⁹ Subsequently Arnold vowed that “he would never submit to petty, self-serving despots, he would never bow before the capricious will of such persons, and that he would resist despotic power.”⁴⁰

So after the attacks on Arnold’s character, the threat of court martial, and reprimand by Washington there was no turning back. Shortly after his marriage to Peggy Shippen, Arnold started communications with the British and in an unthinkable and unforeseen move Arnold reached out to Major John André in a letter on July 12, 1780 where he stated “I can render the

³⁶ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 331.

³⁷ 447-448.

³⁸ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 423.

³⁹ 4.

⁴⁰ 314.

most essential Services... The mass of the People are heartily tired of the War, and wish to be on their former footing...the present Struggles are like the pangs of a dying man, violent but of a short duration,” and just a few days later in another letter to André on July 15, 1780 Arnold offered up West Point to the British.⁴¹ Benedict Arnold’s treason began.

Arnold’s Treason

We can understand Benedict Arnold’s mindset, his wounded pride and insults to his honor and we can understand his frustrations with government. But why would Arnold resort to treason? Martin explained that Arnold had lost faith in a cause that he once so strongly believed in and he saw the languishing support and corruptness of a system that he no longer wished to defend. We see evidence of this in a letter that Arnold wrote to Peggy on Feb 8, 1779 just two months before he first reached out to André, where he stated, “I am heartily tired with my journey, and almost so with human nature. I daily discover so much baseness and ingratitude among mankind that I almost blush at being of the same species”⁴²

Arnold also knew that the American people were tired of the war and he knew that he was not the only officer troubled by the corrupt system. This was evidenced in a letter that was written by one of Washington’s ranking officers in July 1780 which stated, “I despise my countrymen. I wish I could say I was not born in America. I once gloried in it, but am now ashamed of it...the insults and neglects which the army have met with from the country beggars all description.”⁴³ This discontent resulted in mass defections and as described by Randall, “large

⁴¹ Benedict Arnold, *Benedict Arnold to John Andre*, July 12 & July 15, 1780, Letters. From the Collections of the Clements Library Clinton Letters Collection, *Spy Letters of the American Revolution*, <http://clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/spies/index-clinton.html>.

⁴² Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 445.

⁴³ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 425.

numbers of citizens not only refused to help but were signing loyalty oaths to support the advancing British Army.”⁴⁴

Arnold felt he had the basis for treason, one that would be supported not only by the people but also by the officers who were tired and disillusioned with the war as well. Martin explained that,

“Arnold did not doubt his perception of a cause hopelessly lost and he hoped his defection would help destroy what he now believed was an errant misguided attempt to establish a new republican polity in America and he felt that by acting decisively that he would encourage other worthy patriots, most particularly disgruntled soldiers in the Continental army, to come to their senses, renounce the Revolution, and revert to their natural British allegiance.”⁴⁵

Arnold believed that what he was doing was right. He believed that disgruntled Americans tired of the war and dissatisfied officers would see his act of treason as a welcome excuse to return their allegiance back to Britain. He saw himself as a “great reconciler of the British Empire” and hoped to bring peace and virtue back into a corrupted system.⁴⁶

Initial communications between Arnold and André support this. According to Winthrop Sargent in *The Life of Major John André*, Arnold’s intervention was urged to establish peace between Britain and America. In a communication received before he went to West Point Arnold was offered the opportunity to rectify the issues of the war. The letter outlined terms of a truce where the colonies would get their “parliament composed of two chambers filled with American members only, their laws would come from this assembly, commerce would be free to the thirteen colonies and they would enjoy good government and protection provided by the British

⁴⁴ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 323.

⁴⁵ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 4-5.

⁴⁶ 5.

when needed and the two lands would peacefully govern all the world.”⁴⁷ The letter went on to explain that “There is no one but General Arnold who can surmount obstacles so great as these. A man of so much courage will never despair of the republic...render then, brave General, this important service to your country. The colonies cannot sustain much longer the unequal strife. Your troops are perishing in misery, they are badly armed, half naked, and crying for bread. Let us put an end to so many calamities.”⁴⁸ Benedict Arnold believed he had the solution to a problem that he could fix. Arnold offered up West Point to the British on July 15, 1780 in the hopes of ending the war quickly.

After Benedict Arnold’s plan to turn West Point over to the British was discovered Arnold escaped to the protection of the British. Violent reactions to his treason spread throughout the colonies but Arnold still perceived his act as a “palliative solution to the ills of the war.”⁴⁹ This was evidenced in Arnold’s *Proclamation by Brigadier-General Benedict Arnold* which was published on Oct. 20, 1780. This Proclamation was addressed to officers and soldiers of the continental army “who had the real interest of their country at heart” and who were determined to “no longer be tools and dupes of Congress.” In it he stated that “Sir Henry Clinton had authorized him to raise a Corps of cavalry and infantry...and that he would embrace this opportunity of advancing men whose valor I have witnessed and whose principles are favorable to a union with Britain and true American Liberty.” Arnold went on to describe the sufferings they had gone through in the fight for liberty such as “lack of pay, hunger and nakedness and that this was a direct result of the neglect, contempt, and corruption of Congress.” He appealed to

⁴⁷ Sargent, *The Life of Major John Andre*, 221, 447-8.

⁴⁸ 448-9.

⁴⁹ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 5.

citizens and soldiers alike to reflect on what “you have lost,—consider to what you are reduced, and by your courage repel the ruin that still threatens you.”⁵⁰ Arnold also assured the colonists and soldiers that Britain intended to give Americans “the rights and privileges of colonies unimpaired together with perpetual exemption from taxation.”⁵¹

But as we know things did not go as Benedict Arnold had planned. Instead of inspiring others to join him in fighting back against a corrupt system and establishing peace, Benedict Arnold went on to become one of the most hated men in America.

Peggy Shippen - Guilty or Innocent?

Margaret “Peggy” Shippen was born in Philadelphia in 1760 to a wealthy and influential family with Loyalist leanings.⁵² She was a young socialite living in Philadelphia during a very derisive time where significant political issues polarized the atmosphere leading to increased tensions between the Loyalists and Patriots. This was evidenced by an article written in the Pennsylvania Packet newspaper in 1777 where citizens were divided into five political categories. These were the Rank Tories who were Loyalists that favored “unconditional submission to Great Britain”; the Moderate Men who preferred a “continued place within the British Empire and took a stand to hate the people of New England and to love all Rank Tories”; The Timid Whigs who were “open to independence but pessimistic about the colonists’ ability to resist British power”; the Furious Whigs who “hurt the cause of liberty by their indiscriminate

⁵⁰ Benedict Arnold, *By Brigadier-General Benedict Arnold, A Proclamation: To the officers and soldiers of the Continental army who have the real interest of their country at heart, and who are determined to be no longer the tools and dupes of Congress, or France*, October 20, 1780. Broadside. From The Library of Congress, *Broadsides, Leaflets, and Pamphlets from America and Europe Collection*. <http://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.11100200>.

⁵¹ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 574-5.

⁵² Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 10.

violence”; and finally the Staunch Whigs who were “depicted as heroes, resolute and resilient, who would rather renounce their existence than their beloved independence.”⁵³

One’s political leaning determined your safety within the city and when war was officially declared in 1775 the Shippen’s family safety was tenuous. Because of the escalating political climate the Shippen’s were forced to move several times for their safety trying to avoid measures put in place “to punish traitors and other disaffected persons,” but the Shippen family eventually moved back to Philadelphia in 1777 when the British captured Philadelphia, making it safe for the family to return. It was during this time that the young socialite Peggy Shippen met and became friends with Captain John André who was a British officer under General William Howe’s command.⁵⁴

Philadelphia during British occupation was a social scene for young socialites which was filled with many parties, dances and opportunities to rub elbows with British military. Both Peggy Shippen and John André socialized within the same circles becoming fast friends. He would frequently visit Peggy Shippen in her home and gifted her a sketched portrait of herself.⁵⁵ André was most remembered during his time in Philadelphia for his elaborate party, the Meschianza, where André “served as impresario, developing the themes, costumes, decorations, and activities.” The party was a huge success, was highly attended and solidified André’s position of being well liked and respected in Philadelphia society.⁵⁶ André was then assigned to

⁵³ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 18.

⁵⁴ 22-27.

⁵⁵ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 398.

⁵⁶ Larry J. Reynolds, “Patriot and Criminals, Criminal and Patriots: Representations of the Case of Major André,” *South Central Review* Vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring, 1992): 61.

go to New York and after he left Philadelphia Peggy kept up correspondence with him over the years.

Peggy met Benedict Arnold in 1778, a Continental military commander in Philadelphia, through various social events held among Philadelphia socialites.⁵⁷ Arnold became enamored with Peggy Shippen and made his intentions known in a letter to Miss Shippen dated September 25, 1778 where he stated, “Dear madam, your charms have lighted up a flame in my bosom which can never be extinguished your heavenly image is too deeply impressed ever to be effaced...pardon me, Dear Madame, for disclosing a passion I could no longer confine in my tortured bosom.”⁵⁸ The Shippen family were not keen on the match because Arnold “had several things going against him, his age- he was 37, his leg- which was badly crippled with the prospects for recovery uncertain, and financial- he had financial obligations to his three sons and his sister Hannah”⁵⁹ But the most important reason against the marriage was because shortly after their engagement the Pennsylvania Council issued eight charges against Benedict Arnold and declared him a public enemy who was subject to imprisonment and disgrace. Arnold was eventually cleared of six out of the eight charges. Peggy Shippen married Benedict Arnold on April 8, 1779 at the age of 18.⁶⁰

Shortly after they were married Benedict Arnold’s role as traitor began. It is believed that Peggy Shippen was instrumental in helping her husband become a traitor who conspired to turn

⁵⁷ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 427.

⁵⁸ Lewis Burd Walker & B. Arnold, et al., “Life of Margaret Shippen, Wife of Benedict Arnold (continued),” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 25, no. 1 (1901): 30.

⁵⁹ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 83.

⁶⁰ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 427-8.

West Point over to the British. Jacob and Case speculated in *Treacherous Beauty*, that “the timing of their conspiracy which occurred a month after their wedding suggests that Peggy was the clear catalyst.” They pointed out that the people the Arnolds involved in their plan were from Peggy’s world, most notably John André, the couple’s British contact who was a close friend of Peggy’s and Joseph Stansbury, who would carry Arnold’s messages to the British, was more familiar with the Shippen family than with Arnold.”⁶¹ Jacob and Case surmised that it was only natural that André would be chosen because he was someone Peggy could trust. “Peggy may not have yet learned that he was Britain’s spymaster but she almost certainly knew that he was highly placed with Clinton. And she knew that the days of parlor games and dances and friendship in Philadelphia had forged a trust that would be vital if the plot was to come to fruition.”⁶²

Further evidence supporting Peggy’s involvement was seen in John André’s first letter to Joseph Stansbury. As Jacob and Case pointed out, it became clear through the “first correspondence that André knew, without talking to either Arnold or his wife, that Peggy Shippen was important to the plot, and that she could be counted on if a second channel was needed.”⁶³ John André stated in his letter to Joseph Stansbury on May 10, 1779 that, “The Lady might write to me at the same time with one of her intimates. She will guess who I mean, the latter remaining ignorant of interlining and sending the letter. I will write myself to the friend and give occasion for a reply. The letters may talk of the Meschianza and other nonsense.”⁶⁴ André

⁶¹ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 92-3.

⁶² 102.

⁶³ 101.

⁶⁴ John Andre, *John Andre to Joseph Stansbury*, May 10, 1779, *Spy Letters of the American Revolution*.

clearly understood that Peggy was directly involved because of their past relationship.

Other incriminating pieces of evidence supporting Peggy's involvement with her husband's plan were presented by Randall where he explained that in a letter written by Arnold to Andre on May 23, 1779 in response to André's May 10th letter, Arnold added a postscript stating, "Madam Arnold presents her particular compliments," acknowledging to André that she was in on the plot. Peggy also wrote André directly in a "shopping list" letter in July 1779 to help keep negotiations going between her husband and André. According to Randall this indicated that "Peggy had become the driving force behind Arnold's treason and that she was the go-between and negotiator."⁶⁵ André's Millinery Letter of August 16, 1779 which he wrote in response to Peggy's July letter stated "I hope you would infer a zeal to be further employed," referencing his eagerness to work with Arnold.⁶⁶ Directly contacting Peggy to encourage continued communications with Arnold confirmed Peggy's involvement in André and Arnold's dealings together.⁶⁷

Perhaps the most dramatic example of her probable knowledge and suspected part in treason was when Arnold and André's plan to give West Point over to the British was discovered when John André was captured. It is speculated that in order to buy her husband time to escape to British protection Peggy put on a 'mad scene' where she behaved as if she had lost her mind.⁶⁸ It was documented that after Arnold told her of the plot's discovery and his hasty goodbye and

⁶⁵ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 468 & 475.

⁶⁶ Sargent, *The Life of Major John Andre*, 220.

⁶⁷ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 111.

⁶⁸ 160.

escape she was ranting and raving and in great distress. Alexander Hamilton confirmed this when he described the scene. “She fell into a swoon and remained frantic all day accusing every one who approached her with an intention to murder her child and exhibiting every other mark of the most genuine and agonizing distress.”⁶⁹ In “Life of Margaret Shippen, Wife of Benedict Arnold,” Walker et al described a scene when Dr. Eustis was called to the house and found “Mrs. Arnold’s situation alarming. He found her at the head of the staircase, in great dishabille, her hair disheveled, knowing no one, and frantic in the arms of her maid, and Arnold's two aids, struggling to liberate herself from them. She was carried back to her chamber, and fell into convulsions, which lasted several hours.”⁷⁰ Peggy was raving that “General Arnold will never return...he is gone forever-there, the spirits have carried him up there. They have put hot irons in his head” and she claimed that the hot irons plagued her as well and that the only person who could make it go away was General George Washington. By having the General in her house, tending to her needs, Jacob and Case suggested that she was able to give her husband the time he needed to escape before word got out about his treason.⁷¹ Colonel Varick, aide to Benedict Arnold, who was present confirmed this when he admitted years after the incident that Peggy had been “acting to protect herself and her baby and to try and buy time for her husband’s escape.”⁷²

Further evidence supporting Peggy’s role in supporting her husband and his plot came from a statement made by Theodosia Prevost who had hosted Peggy one evening while she was

⁶⁹ Lewis Burd Walker & B. Arnold, et al., “Life of Margaret Shippen, Wife of Benedict Arnold (continued),” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 25, no. 2 (1901): 149.

⁷⁰ Walker et al., “Life of Margaret Shippen,” no 2, 152.

⁷¹ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 161.

⁷² Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 558.

on her way to West Point and then again on her way back to Philadelphia to be with her family after Arnold's treason was discovered. As recalled by her husband in *Memoirs of Aaron Burr*,

“As soon as they were left alone, Mrs. Arnold became tranquilized, and assured Mrs. Prevost that she was heartily sick of the theatrics she was exhibiting,” Burr recalled. “She stated that she had corresponded with the British commander-that she was disgusted with the American cause and those who had the management of public affairs-and that, through great persuasion and unceasing perseverance, she had ultimately brought the general into an arrangement to surrender West Point to the British.”⁷³

Jacob and Case explained that “if Burr's memoirs are to be believed, Peggy felt comfortable enough with Prevost to unburden herself and to admit the she had been putting on a show” which clearly implicated Mrs. Arnold as the instigator to treason.⁷⁴ Burr's memoir went on to state that “Mrs. Arnold was a gay, accomplished, artful, and extravagant woman...who contributed greatly to the utter ruin of her husband, and thus doomed to everlasting infamy and disgrace all the fame he had acquired as a gallant soldier at the sacrifice of his blood.”⁷⁵ As Jacob and Case explained Burr's claims are legitimized because he lived with Dr. William Shippen after he was orphaned as a boy and knew Peggy and her family well.⁷⁶

Given the evidence supporting Peggy Shippen's knowledge and her active involvement with Arnold's treason, testimony defending Peggy's innocence and lack of involvement is seen in letters defending her innocence and her inability to be involved. Major David Franks, a staff aide to Benedict Arnold who was very familiar with Peggy, stated, “she was subject to occasional

⁷³ Aaron Burr, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr Volume 1*, ed. by Matthew L. Davis, (New York: 2005), 219-220, The Gutenberg Project.

⁷⁴ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 170.

⁷⁵ Burr, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr*, 219-220.

⁷⁶ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 170.

paroxysms of physical indisposition, attended by nervous debility, during which she would give utterance to anything and everything on her mind...so much so as to cause us to be scrupulous of what we told her or said in her hearing.”⁷⁷ Jacob and Case corroborated that even “the surviving members of the lady’s family, some of them her contemporaries, are satisfied that the texture of her mind did not qualify her to be the confidante of such perilous secrets.”⁷⁸

Alexander Hamilton as well was convinced of Peggy’s innocence and lack of any knowledge of her husband’s traitorous plan. Hamilton recounted his impressions of Peggy that morning of her mad scene in a letter to Henry Laurens and to Miss Schuyler where he stated, “It was impossible not to have been touched with her situation. I saw an amiable woman, frantic with distress for the loss of a husband she tenderly loved; a traitor to his country and his fame; a disgrace to his connexions: it was the most affecting scene I ever was witness to.”⁷⁹ He went on to say that “all the sweetness of beauty, all the loveliness of innocence, all the tenderness of a wife, and all the fondness of a mother, showed themselves in her appearance and conduct. We have every reason to believe that she was entirely unacquainted with the plan, and that the first knowledge of it, was when Arnold went to tell her he must banish himself from his country...her sufferings were so eloquent, that I wished myself her brother, to have a right to become her defender.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Walker et al., “Life of Margaret Shippen,” no 2, 173.

⁷⁸ Jacob and Case, *Treacherous Beauty*, 167.

⁷⁹ Walker et al., “Life of Margaret Shippen,” no 2, 140.

⁸⁰ 149.

Further evidence supporting Peggy's innocence is seen in a letter written to Peggy from Arnold giving her explicit directions about where to stay while on her way to West Point. This letter was closely examined and its original inspected by Walker et al. In Arnold's letter he stated, "at Paramus you will be very politely received by Mrs. Watkins & Mrs. Prevost, very Genteel People." Walker et al stated that after inspecting the original letter they noted that Arnold had first written "very polite People," and then struck out the word "polite" and replaced it with the word "Genteel" implicating that Mrs. Arnold was not acquainted with Mrs. Prevost.⁸¹ This directly contradicts Burr's claim that Peggy knew Mrs. Prevost and was comfortable enough to confide in her as Burr claimed she did. This casts doubts on Burr's claim that Peggy had admitted to Mrs. Prevost that she had been putting on a show.

In another letter that was written by the Shippen family in response to the accusations made by Aaron Burr, the Shippen family argued against Peggy's involvement and called into question the intentions and character of Aaron Burr. "Burr offered his escort, which he pretended might be useful to her in the then excited state of the public mind and on the way to Philadelphia he made love to this afflicted lady, thinking to take advantage of her feelings of indignation towards her husband...and indignantly repelled, he treasured up his revenge, and left a story behind him, to blast this amiable lady's fame, when there might be no one to disprove or deny it."⁸² The Shippen family response to Burr's statement and their accusations against Burr's

⁸¹ Walker et al., "Life of Margaret Shippen," no 1, 45.

⁸² Walker et al., "Life of Margaret Shippen," no 2, 155-6.

character, according to Randall, was incorrect because Burr was not in the carriage with Peggy on the way to Philadelphia, Franks, another aide to Arnold was.⁸³

Reactions toward Peggy after her husband's treason were of pity and sympathy but the discovery of the Millinery Letter by Joseph Reed cast doubt on Peggy's perceived innocence because its author, John André, was being held prisoner as an accused spy. It became speculated that "André, under the mask of friendship and former acquaintance at Meschianzas and balls, opened a correspondence in August, 1779 with Mrs. Arnold," implicating her involvement with her husband's treason and casting doubt on her innocence, forcing her to leave Philadelphia to join her husband in New York.⁸⁴

When reviewing the evidence either in favor for or against her involvement I believe that Peggy was fully aware and completely involved. Peggy was from a Loyalist leaning family, her friends were Loyalists, she frequently socialized with British officials and her family had been directly affected by the Patriot cause when they were forced to frequently move to avoid persecution and arrest. As Jacob and Case stated at the onset, André was only known to Peggy, she had a friendship with him and the only way Arnold would have known who to contact would have been through Peggy. André's letter to Joseph Stansbury, Peggy's "shopping list" letter and André's Millinery Letter to Peggy all support this important link between Peggy and himself and directly implicates her involvement and knowledge of what was going on. And if Burr is to be believed, Peggy confessed her involvement to Mrs. Prevost.

⁸³ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 572.

⁸⁴ Walker et al., "Life of Margaret Shippen," no 2, 158.

The Ballad of Major John André

Now Arnold to New York has gone,
A-fighting for his King,
And left poor Major André
On the gallows for to swing.
André was executed,
He looked both meek and mild,
His face was fair and handsome,
And pleasantly he smiled.
It moved each eye with pity,
And every heart there bled,
And everyone wished him released
And Arnold in his stead.⁸⁵

John André - A Tragic Hero?

John André was born in London in 1751. He was an educated man proficient in several languages with a strong artistic background in poetry, music, drawing and painting. After joining the army and serving in Germany André was captured in Quebec during the campaign of 1775 and sent to Lancaster Pennsylvania where he was eventually exchanged and returned to service in 1776 in New York.⁸⁶ As part of an amateur theatrical group organized by General Burgoyne André designed and painted scenery, curtains, and costumes for productions and he wrote plays and acted in them.⁸⁷ Of all the productions that André was involved with the Meschianza, a medieval pageant thrown in honor of General Howe who was resigning as commander-in-chief, was the most elaborate and spectacular of them all. The celebration included “a regatta on the

⁸⁵ Music and the American Revolution, *The Ballad of Major John André*, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/revolution/ballad_major_andre.cfm

⁸⁶ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 396.

⁸⁷ 397.

Delaware, army bands, extravagant costumes, a parade of horses, soldiers, and heralds costumed for a mock joust, a lavish dinner, a ball, and fireworks.”⁸⁸ In addition to his acting and designing career André was known to sketch and cut silhouettes of some of society’s most prominent members, one of which included a sketch of his close friend Peggy Shippen whom he had met while in Philadelphia.⁸⁹

Outside of his artistic side André was an efficient soldier who rose quickly through the ranks and became adjutant general to General Henry Clinton, British commander-in-chief. He was eventually assigned spymaster for British intelligence and it was John André who was in direct contact with Benedict Arnold. A review of the *Spy Letters of the American Revolution* gives us a timeline of what occurred and confirmed that Arnold initially contacted André through Joseph Stansbury in May of 1779, a month after his marriage to Peggy Shippen. Stansbury met with André in person at Jonathan Odell’s home and after their meeting André wrote Joseph Stansbury a letter on May 10, 1779 detailing André’s expectations of Benedict Arnold and outlining the kind of information he wanted and how their ciphering was to be handled.⁹⁰ Randall explained that at this time several letters were exchanged between Arnold and André negotiating terms of payment for Arnold’s services. Peggy became involved when negotiations reached an impasse by sending André a “shopping list” letter hoping to keep negotiations alive.⁹¹ On August 16, 1779 in response to Peggy’s letter, André sent the Millinery Letter to Peggy Shippen to make

⁸⁸ Larry J. Reynolds, “Patriot and Criminals, Criminal and Patriots: Representations of the Case of Major André,” *South Central Review* Vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 61.

⁸⁹ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 398.

⁹⁰ John André, *John André to Joseph Stansbury*, May 10, 1779, *Spy Letters of the American Revolution*.

⁹¹ Randall, *Patriot and Traitor*, 473-77.

sure that Arnold knew that André was still very interested in maintaining communications with him.⁹² But it wasn't until July of 1780 that Benedict Arnold earnestly reached back out to André in two separate letters. The first on July 12th he offered his most 'essential services' and announced the probability of being assigned command of West Point and provided details of its inspections and the second letter on July 15th he discussed the terms of surrender of West Point and made his request to meet John André in person.⁹³

General Clinton sent André to meet with Benedict Arnold to arrange for the seizure of West Point.⁹⁴ In a letter from Clinton to Lord George Germain, Clinton stated that "General Arnold insisted that the person sent to confer with him should be the Adjutant General Major André, who indeed had been the person on my part who managed and carried on the secret correspondence." General Clinton gave André very specific instructions prior to his meeting with Arnold in order to ensure his safety which included "not to take off his uniform, not to go behind enemy lines, and not to carry any papers on him, all of which he disobeyed."⁹⁵

On Sept. 21 1780 André was brought up the Hudson on the British war ship the Vulture to meet with Benedict Arnold. After the meeting André was supposed to return to the Vulture but when Americans fired on the ship, the Vulture was forced to retreat and André had to spend the night hiding behind enemy lines. The next morning while trying to make his way back to British territory under the alias of John Anderson, he was captured by three minutemen wearing civilian

⁹² Sargent, *The Life of Major John André*, 220-222.

⁹³ Benedict Arnold, *Benedict Arnold to John André*, July 12 & 15, 1780, *Spy Letters of the American Revolution*.

⁹⁴ Speidel, "The Artistic Spy," 398-401.

⁹⁵ Reynolds, "Patriots and Criminals," 61.

clothing, was searched, and found to have incriminating documents in his boot. He was arrested, imprisoned and charged with espionage.⁹⁶

Attempts were made to save André from execution. Evidence of this is seen in a letter from General Clinton to George Washington on September 26, 1780 where Clinton stated that, “Being informed that the King’s Adjutant General in America has been stopt under Major General Arnold’s passports, and is detained a prisoner in your Excellency’s Army, I have the honor to inform Your, Sir, that I permitted Major André to go to Major General Arnold at the particular request of that General Officer... a Flag of Truce was sent to receive Major André, and passports granted for his return, I therefore can have no doubt but that Your Excellency will immediately direct that this Officer has permission to return to my Orders at New York.⁹⁷ Instead of allowing André to return to Clinton, General Washington wrote to Clinton on September 30, 1780 stating that he had “referred his case to the examination and decision of a Board of General Officers...and the Board having maturely considered these facts do also report to his Excellency Genl Washington that Major André Adjutant General to the British Army ought to be considered as a Spy from the Enemy, and that agreeable to the law and usage of Nations it is their opinion he ought to suffer death.”⁹⁸

Having accepted that he was going to be executed as a spy André appealed to General George Washington requesting that he be shot as a gentleman rather than hanged as a spy. Washington ignored his appeal ordering that he be hanged but he acknowledged that André was a

⁹⁶ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 401.

⁹⁷ Henry Clinton, *Henry Clinton to George Washington*, September 26, 1780, Letter. From National Archives, *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-03439>.

⁹⁸ George Washington, *George Washington to Henry Clinton*, September 30, 1780, National Archives.

man of accomplishments, who was more “unfortunate than criminal.”⁹⁹ André was hung as a spy on October 2, 1780.

This statement made by Washington that André was more “unfortunate than criminal” was symbolic of the popular opinion held among John André’s captors but why would André, a criminal caught in the act of espionage seem unfortunate rather than be seen as what he was, a man guilty of a serious crime? When looking at how others described John André we can see a pattern of how he was perceived. According to John Knight in his article titled, “The Death and Resurrection of Major John André,” Knight explained that John André was equally liked by both men and women, he was good looking and could easily charm anyone he met. Speidel in her article, “The Artistic Spy: A Note on the Talents Of Major André” also describes André as brave and resourceful and that he was considered both a man of arms and a man of art.¹⁰⁰ Alexander Hamilton also wrote about André in a very compelling way. In Andy Trees article “Benedict Arnold, John André, and His Three Yeoman Captors: A Sentimental Journey or American Virtue Defined,” he detailed Alexander Hamilton’s impression of André while imprisoned. Hamilton wrote about and highlighted André’s importance by acknowledging his rapid military progression in both rank and reputation and then went on to explain that at the height of his career he had been given an opportunity that would have greatly benefited both England and himself if successful, but instead he failed and while facing execution he was brave and stoic, “a behavior that called forth tears from those who witnessed his death.”¹⁰¹ And proving his high opinion of André, it was Hamilton who verbally requested on behalf of André that he be shot as a

⁹⁹ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 403.

¹⁰⁰ 406.

¹⁰¹ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 253.

gentleman instead of being disgracefully hung.¹⁰² Further evidence of Hamilton's high regard for André was seen when Hamilton sent an unofficial unsigned letter to Clinton hiding amongst letters written by Washington to Clinton, where he suggested an exchange of John André for Benedict Arnold stating that "it was the only way to save him."¹⁰³

What was interesting was that a man that had been found guilty of being a spy on American soil in an attempt to seize West Point and turn it over to the British was mourned and pitied by the very same people he was committing a crime against. Trees stated that Hamilton's observations and statement about André cast André's story as one of a "meteoric rise and fall," a theme that is synonymous with tragedy.¹⁰⁴ So instead of being seen as a spy who had tried to seize West Point Hamilton had transformed him into a tragic figure - a tragic hero who had the misfortune of being caught.

Speidel also questioned this general view of André. She suggested that had André not been attractive and generally well liked and talented that people's reactions toward him would have been different. He wouldn't have been seen as a "young figure doomed by fate to an end so sad that it aroused pathos."¹⁰⁵ Rather he would have been seen as a spy that was getting what he deserved. Trees also supported this viewpoint by pointing out that André for all intents and purposes would have been seen as "an unlikely candidate for admiration. He was caught as a spy, a character universally despised among men of honor."¹⁰⁶ But he argued that it was Hamilton's

¹⁰² Sargent, *Life of Major John André*, 390.

¹⁰³ 364.

¹⁰⁴ Trees, "Benedict Arnold," 253.

¹⁰⁵ Speidel, "The Artistic Spy," 406.

¹⁰⁶ Trees, "Benedict Arnold," 251.

exposition of John André that removed this stain from André's character by explaining that "André was forced to assume the character of a spy against his will by the treacherous Arnold" and then went on to discuss André's positive traits and many virtues as a means of defending André's honor and justifying his mistake.¹⁰⁷ This accusation that Arnold had forced André to assume the role of spy was refuted by André himself when he wrote a letter to Clinton on September 29, 1780 where he explained to Clinton that he had made mistakes and had not heeded Clinton's orders.¹⁰⁸ Benedict Arnold, in addition to Clinton, wrote two letters attempting to exonerate John André's actions of that fateful day and claimed that André was protected under a flag of truce and should be released.¹⁰⁹

A contrasting view on André's image was looked at in "Patriots and Criminals, Criminals and Patriots: Representations of the case of Major John André" by Larry Reynolds, where it was suggested that while in captivity, André's letters to Washington and to Clinton revealed a "man transforming his series of tactical mistakes into a triumph of honor and virtue," and that for André the fact that he was an actor who was used to taking on a role, the role of martyr would have come naturally.¹¹⁰ Reynolds explained that "during the days before his execution, André performed the role of a sentimental hero of romance, and he orchestrated his final days with consummate skill. The American officers who guarded him during his trial were much impressed by his genteel manners, speech, and demeanor."¹¹¹ He stated that even André's walk to the

¹⁰⁷ Trees, "Benedict Arnold," 251.

¹⁰⁸ Sargent, *Life of Major John André*, 360.

¹⁰⁹ 383.

¹¹⁰ Reynolds, "Patriots and Criminals," 61.

¹¹¹ 61.

gallows was theatrical as he “bowed and spoke to officers he recognized, jumped up onto the gallows cart, adjusted a blindfold so that it sat correctly and made a short statement to the large crowd stating, ‘I pray you to bear witness that I meet my fate like a brave man.’”¹¹² And as Hamilton had said of André’s execution “he excited the admiration, and melted the hearts of the beholders. ... he died universally esteemed and universally regretted.”¹¹³ André had played his final role well.

Benedict Arnold & John André - Villain vs Hero

American reaction to Benedict Arnold’s treason was quick and violent. News of his betrayal spread like wildfire igniting deep rooted hate among Americans. While people were mourning the death of a young man who held so much potential, they burned the two faced effigies of a man who was considered greedy and evil. His effigies were paraded through the streets, burned, tarred and feathered throughout cities across America. Newspaper articles preached of the evils of Benedict Arnold, quickly transforming a war hero into a “thoroughgoing scoundrel suited only for robbery, mean deception, barbarity, hypocrisy, falsehood, ingratitude, avarice, and worst of all treason.” He became a man seen as truly wicked who deserved “detestation and abhorrence,” and he became the most hated man in America.¹¹⁴

American’s violent reaction occurred because American virtue was on the decline and Benedict Arnold’s betrayal and subsequent lack of virtue echoed what the current climate was. Royster explained this best when he stated that Arnold was troubling to his fellow countrymen

¹¹² Reynolds, “Patriots and Criminals,” 62.

¹¹³ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 253.

¹¹⁴ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 8-9.

because he was “representative of tensions within the Revolution and flaws within themselves. Some of Arnold's traits ran deep in revolutionary society, and his symbolic meaning became contested terrain precisely because defining his meaning was bound up with larger questions of American identity.”¹¹⁵

Arnold made Americans aware of their distrust and flaws within themselves and in order to come to terms with this they had to establish the difference between Arnold and themselves, the “true Americans.”¹¹⁶ Martin explained that they did this by demonizing Arnold. Arnold’s story became one full of distortions. A perverse childhood, an uncontrollable boy, and deviant actions which led to gang like behavior as a teen who eventually morphed into a treasonous villain who deceived innocent Americans with his ultimate betrayal. He became a “self centered, aggrandizing person who invariably employed his natural physical and mental talents in distorted ways” and lessons on how to properly raise a worthy child instructed mothers to “teach their children how to obey and to display kindness to all. Stifling any instincts in their children toward viciousness would help to protect the republic from future Arnolds - the kind of fiendish adult who would have drained the life-blood of his endangered country.”¹¹⁷

Arnold became a man seen as evil and greedy, a man who lacked honor and virtue, everything that Americans purported themselves as being which in fact was not the case. Corruption for profit was high, especially at the expense of American soldiers. Rotten food, poorly made equipment and bad supplies were repeatedly sold to the soldiers. Royster explained that “wagoners drained the brine from barrels of pickled meat to lighten their loads, then charged

¹¹⁵ Royster, “Nature of Treason,” 184.

¹¹⁶ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 248.

¹¹⁷ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 13-14.

at the full weight for shipping spoiled meat...cobblers used old scraps to make shoes that looked good but quickly fell apart...gunsmiths cheated the government when hired to repair arms and large quantities of gunpowder were bad and not to be depended on.”¹¹⁸ This was how the American people were treating their soldiers. Arnold’s story was their own, with issues of loyalty and character being questioned and they didn’t like what they saw.¹¹⁹

Royster expounded on the readily accepted beliefs that Arnold was a selfish man who felt entitled, overlooked and wronged. He was a highly celebrated soldier who took matters into his own hands and betrayed his country for his own personal gains and who represented the “worst crimes against virtue.” He had succumb to his desire for ease and comfort, and wanted recognition for his accomplishments and when he didn’t get it he turned his back on his country and the people he represented.¹²⁰ But Americans were doing the same thing. Arnold was described as self-centered, boisterous and defiant. Americans were as well, they were fighting back against a system they were unhappy with and felt wasn’t treating them fairly. They led riots in the streets and became defiant and fought back. They cheated their fellow soldiers and turned to corruption to survive. They resorted to robbery, mean deception, barbarity, hypocrisy, falsehood, and ingratitude, all the adjectives used to describe Arnold, could be used to describe themselves as well. Arnold was witness to all of this and decided to try and fix it.

Martin attempted to explain that people didn’t understand that Benedict Arnold had turned his back on a system that he and many others believed was truly corrupt and failing, so

¹¹⁸ Royster, “Nature of Treason,” 177.

¹¹⁹ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 248-49.

¹²⁰ Royster, “Nature of Treason,” 189.

while it was easy to hate what he did it was less easy to come to terms with why he did it. He may never be seen as a hero but maybe he can be remembered as a true patriot that did give his all to a cause that he truly believed in but because of deep seated corruption within the very government he was fighting for he became disillusioned with the system, lost his faith in the system and ultimately turned his back on what he perceived was a failing cause. This version of a man who saw the problems within the system first hand and who, some might argue, bravely chose to leave and honor his primary allegiance to the British was one that Americans were not willing or ready to accept. It was easier to hate a man that was greedy and evil and who lacked honor and a moral code. Arnold initially believed that Americans ran the risk of becoming “poor and oppressed if they tamely gave up their liberties.”¹²¹ But with the war’s turmoil, deceit and corruption he came to believe that an alliance with Britain with renewed American powers would be a better option than what was currently being witnessed by himself and others. So in the end Benedict Arnold betrayed his country and made Americans face the very things they hated about themselves.

André on the other hand was remembered as a tragic hero because he was the embodiment of what it was to be a hero and a gentleman - well liked, handsome, educated, and multi-talented. As Trees explained, Hamilton’s story about John André received such widespread attention not because it was true but because it tapped into “ideas that Americans wanted to believe about themselves.”¹²² John André was a tragic hero because his acts were inspired “by

¹²¹ Martin, *An American Warrior Reconsidered*, 58.

¹²² Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 254.

loyalty to a King” and even though his acts were treasonous and wrong he was virtuous because he was sacrificing himself for his country and died as a gentleman.¹²³

Lori J. Ducharme and Gary Alan Fine in their article titled, “The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous” explained that it would be “natural to assume that the person involved with Benedict Arnold would be remembered as an enemy. But Americans saw André as a tragic hero - tragic because this brave and charming officer was hanged as a spy...André was defined as an obedient soldier, not a conspirator, he was loyal to his commander’s orders.”¹²⁴ Knight in his article also explained that André received such respect because he “symbolized the European model of what a gentleman was and this was what American men aspired to be.”¹²⁵

Andy Trees concluded by explaining that the “idea of sensibility” was a range of “aesthetic, emotional, and psychological responses and was a crucial part of the eighteenth century mentality for educated men and women” and André embodied this idea of sensibility. The American people saw in André what they wanted to see in themselves, a man who was a gentleman to the very end, brave and talented who remained true to his country.¹²⁶

¹²³ Speidel, “The Artistic Spy,” 405.

¹²⁴ Lori J. Ducharme & Fine, Gary Alan Fine, “The Construction of Nonpersonhood and Demonization: Commemorating the Traitorous Reputation of Benedict Arnold,” *Social Forces* Vol. 73, no. 4 (June 1995): 1322.

¹²⁵ John Knight, “The Death and Resurrection of Major John Andre,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, August 14, 2018, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2018/08/the-death-and-resurrection-of-major-john-andre/>.

¹²⁶ Trees, “Benedict Arnold,” 251.

Ultimately in the end it was the mindset of Americans that defined the way these two men were seen and how they are remembered. A hero and a villain who reminded Americans what they aspired to be and not to be.

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