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Jared Gardner. *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. xi + 203 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03670-5.

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How Magazines Almost Changed American History

Jared Gardner's stimulating and highly readable reconceptualization of early American magazines is one of a growing number of books to wrestle with the relationship between the novel and journalism. Straddling the fields of periodical studies, book history, and the histories of American literature and the early republic, this is an ambitious project to reinterpret a group of early American novels as attempts to establish a new genre, an experimental, multivocal type of literature, in which editing, rather than authoring, was central and in which the periodical displaced the novel (p. 38). Gardner believes that those attempts had failed by the 1820s, "but in the previous generations, the outcome was by no means certain" (p. 3). He also suggests that late eighteenth-century principles and practices of what we might now call curating can illuminate twenty-first-century debates about the creative politics of the World Wide Web.

This short, handsomely produced book fizzes with ideas, offered as answers to a question glossed over by established literary histories: why did pioneers of the early American novel such as Charles Brodken Brown and Hannah Webster Foster abandon this form for anonymous periodical work at the end of their careers (p. 28)? Gardner suggests that an understanding of the periodical culture in which these writers were enmeshed enables us to see the miscellaneous form of novels such as Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) or Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) not as disjunctures, but as continuities with the world of magazines (p. 7).

The introduction outlines the book's thesis and shows how the early American novel "often positioned its author as editor, telling a tale based on 'fact', citing 'documents' as source for the tale that is about to be told" (p.13). A rereading of Foster's *The Coquette* introduces the distinctive role of the late eighteenth-century magazine edit-

or, one who anthologized items taken from other publications, like the curator of a museum (indeed many early magazines had titles such as the ***American Museum***). Fictional characters are interpreted as editors and their behavior as editing.

Chapter 1 traces the origins and inspiration of the early American magazine to the work of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the London periodicals, the ***Spectator, Tatler,*** and ***Guardian.*** The ***Spectator*** was founded in 1711 and had its first American emulator ten years later. Fifty years after that, bound copies of these early British periodicals were still sold, read, and treasured by American readers and writers, demonstrating their enduring influence. Gardner introduces the established idea that federalists saw the form of the magazine as symbolizing the ideal structure of their new nation, "radically inclusive yet rigorously organised, polyphonous yet unified" (pp. 36-37). Indeed Benjamin Franklin's founding motto for the new nation, "E pluribus unum" (out of many, one), was taken from a periodical, the English ***Gentleman's Magazine***. A more original insight--that literary culture was based not on great authors nor national boundaries, but democratic and permeable relationships between writers, readers, publishers, and editors--leads to the reminder that the reign of the novel, the author, and the critic has been a short one, and may soon be at an end.

The next two chapters look in detail at the magazines of the early national period, through their editors (chapter 2) and readers and contributors (chapter 3). Gardner contrasts the genteel, nonpartisan space of the magazine with the vicious party politics of the newspaper, and examines editors such as Noah Webster (the ***American Magazine)***, Isaiah Thomas (the ***Massachusetts Magazine***), and Mathew Carey (the ***Columbian Magazine***). He fruitfully contrasts the authoritarian "unalterable constitution" of the book with the more democratic, periodically renewed, magazine (pp. 77-78), and--less convincingly--claims that Webster's chief contribution to periodicals was the invention of editing as the carefully ordered organizing of content.

In chapter 3 the open, democratic space of the magazine is contrasted with the newspaper, where correspondence and reader-contributions were not welcomed. Gardner uses techniques developed by David Paul Nord to describe the readers of these magazines, based on subscription lists, before offering close readings of the material supplied by two contributors, Judith Sargent Murray and Joseph Dennie.[1]

Chapter 4 tries to make sense of the "final experiments with early American magazine culture" in the late writings of Susanna Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown, and the early writing of Washington Irving (p. x). There is an intriguing hint that these writers disapproved of the novel because of its power to draw readers into an imaginary world, preferring the miscellaneous juxtapositions of the magazine, which kept readers firmly in the real world, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's distancing technique (although Brecht is not mentioned).

A short conclusion describes how subsequent periods saw less ambitious hopes for the magazine, more profits, and a "seismic shift in the model of citizenship at the heart of the periodical" (p. 171) as the democracy of consumerism replaced that of participation. Gardner acknowledges that this participation was only available to an elite, so that its "intimate republic of letters" was impossible to maintain as mass literacy grew (calling into question his political claims for this magazine culture). The book ends by drawing parallels between the idealism and cultural democracy of eighteenth-century magazines and the twenty-first-century Internet.

This is an important book, bringing together ideas and insights from disparate fields of study on both sides of the Atlantic, encompassing comparisons of early English and American periodicals and modern-day online culture; politics and

magazine culture; editing and authoring; the distinctive qualities of the book, the magazine, and the newspaper; the transatlantic adaptation of coffee-house culture; the nature of literary success or failure, and the links between reading, writing, and citizenship. Inevitably, when dealing with so many big ideas, Gardner's conclusions are suggestive rather than convincing, but such a sparky, clearly argued book should inspire a great deal of further research.

Its clarity is partly achieved through clear language and well-signposted argument, but partly through a lack of referencing. Only 74 secondary works are referenced in 175 pages of text, with most of this literature related to the history of the American novel rather than early American periodicals, so that relevant scholars such as Lyon Norman Richardson and Robb K. Haberman are not mentioned.[2] This means that when, for example, Gardner joins the debate on how emerging magazine forms mapped onto equally contingent ideas of the nascent republic, he is unable to give a full sense of the current state of scholarship.

The book's almost polemical tone enhances its readability, but occasionally leads Gardner to make shaky points in pursuit of a rhetorical position. He oversimplifies the idea of the "novel of the autonomous individual, the story told through one voice, one psychology" (p. 6) to make a contrast with the many voices of the periodical, ignoring the complexities of free indirect speech and unreliable narrators, for example. More significantly, he repeatedly emphasizes the "failure" of these short-lived, small-circulation titles, presenting periodical work as "something of a literary suicide mission" (p. 70), in order to make the magazine activities of significant literary and political figures more mystifying. Yet these publishers and editors rarely set out to achieve wide circulations or big profits, and their manifestos (not to be taken at face and value, of course) had much loftier aims. There were many motives behind the launch of a magazine in this period, not all of them lofty, and the aims of publishers, editors, and contributors were often achieved--that is, many magazines were successful. Isaiah Thomas used his ***Massachusetts Magazine*** to promote books he was publishing, printing, or selling, and to increase his social prestige. "Magazines arose out of the sociable activities of literary-minded men and women and demonstrated their politeness, sophistication, intellect and civic pride".[3] They also promoted authorship and projects that could result in books. To be fair, Gardner hints at broader criteria for success (p. 148), but does not pursue them.

A more fruitful avenue for assessing success and failure can be found in another recent book on the links between journalism and fiction, Dallas Liddle's ***The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in mid-Victorian Britain*** (2009). Liddle follows journalistic and literary genres as they leap from publication to publication across commercial, literary, and conceptual boundaries. Such an approach would strengthen Gardner's argument by moving the focus away from the "failure" of individual periodicals in terms of profit and longevity. Instead, Liddle's focus on genre would enable us to see the many genres within each periodical as having longer lives, not dying with their host periodicals, but living on, like parasites or reincarnated souls, within each new generation of titles. Other minor criticisms are: the lack of rationale for his focus on northern states, ignoring titles in the South and West; the bare minimum of background on the relationships between magazines and newspapers; and more than twenty typographical errors.

The book could be read as a conversion narrative, by a literary scholar who previously worshipped the novel, but has now transferred his allegiance to the periodical. Gardner has sound historical instincts, seeing patterns and trends where others have not, but he uses literary methods where historical ones might produce more convincing conclusions. However, this may be the con-

sequence of aiming at a literary rather than historical audience. These criticisms aside, Gardner has made an elegant and provocative argument, demonstrating how American fiction could have gone in a very different direction, and provides a stimulating reconceptualization of the author as editor.

Notes

[1]. David Paul Nord, "A Republican Literature: A Study of Magazine Readers and Reading in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," in Nord, *Communities of Journalism: a History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

[2]. Lyon Norman Richardson, *A History of Early American Magazines, 1741-1789* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1931); Robb K. Haberman, "Periodical Publics: Magazines and Literary Networks in Post-Revolutionary America" (PhD diss.: University of Connecticut, 2009), http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/AAI3351334.

[3]. Haberman, "Periodical Publics," 8-9.

(Haberman 2009: pp. 7, 8)

[3]