

JARED GARDNER, *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2012), 203 pp.

In surveying the field that Jared Gardner's essential new book intervenes into, an optimistic observer might adapt his chosen title to offer the headline: "The Rise and Rise of American Magazine Studies." Whether best seen as an adjunct of the recent turn to book history, an outcrop of intellectual history, or, in Gardner's view, as a consequence of the digital era's "return [to] [...] increasingly miscellaneous, anonymous, fragmented, collaborative and decidedly non-novelistic writing" (161), it is the case that a steadily growing scholarly interest in American periodical culture seems to be evident. The last few years alone have seen the publication of significant monographs such as James Landers's *The Improbable First Century of 'Cosmopolitan' Magazine* (2010), Mark Noonan's *Reading 'The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine': American Literature and Culture, 1870-1893* (2010) and Susan Goodman's *The Republic of Words: 'The Atlantic Monthly' and its Writers, 1857-1925* (2011). Yet as the titles of these works clearly indicate, much of the focus of recent periodical research has been on single magazines. This is certainly true for the more specific domain of early American magazine studies, where perhaps the most widely-cited book of the last decade has been William C. Dowling's *Literary Federalism in the Age of Jefferson: Joseph Dennie and 'The Port Folio,' 1801-1812* (1999). The contemporary monographs to come closest to an overview of this period are: Mark Kamrath and Sharon Harris's co-edited volume *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth-Century America* (2005), though as a collection of essays that is necessarily piecemeal; and Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan's *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship* (2008), though that subordinates its myriad insights into a range of magazines to a broader argument about post-Revolutionary sociability. In short, what we lack for the late eighteenth century, as well as for other periods, are systematic, comprehensive accounts of American magazine culture that directly address the distinctiveness of periodical writing and production. Which is precisely why Gardner's *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* deserves to be dubbed indispensable.

As the most sustained and persuasive analysis of the early American magazine's cultural significance that we possess, and as the most detailed account of its repeated failure to prosper, Gardner's book is notable for its ability to draw broad conclusions and strong claims from the material it treats. More specifically, Gardner develops the argument that late eighteenth-century American culture privileged what he calls the "editorial function" (x) over the more individualistic modes of self-expression we have come to associate with the figure of the author and the form of the novel. It is not only the case, in his view, that Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* and Charles Brockden Brown's *Clara Howard* are "novels whose strange features look less anomalous and 'primitive' when read in relation to the periodical culture of the period" (7)—their debt to the form of the magazine points to the pervasive and dominant appeal of spending one's career "as an anonymous editor of a text that is predicated on the disruptions and fragmentation of all the novel would make whole: plotting, characterization, and the authorial function" (6). Consequently, Gardner remarks at the end of his introduction that we need to "begin to rethink our literary history as focused around goals not entirely consistent with those of the nineteenth century novel" (29).

Linking his "more quixotic ambitions of offering a different take on early American literary history [...] in which the novel and its rise is no longer the central story we tell and the celebrity and careers of authors is no longer the primary vehicle by which we tell it" to the relatively "modest" goal of trying to understand why so many "brilliant and rational individuals remained devoted to a form that looks, to our eyes at least, marginal, ephemeral, and most decidedly unprofitable" (38), Gardner considers in his first chapter the emergence of a fledgling American magazine culture during the colonial era. Here the long-lasting influence of British periodical innovators such as Edward Cave, and Addison and Steele, provides the framework for a highly engaging case study of Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Bradford's competition to publish the first American magazine in the early 1740s. Paying close attention to the social institutions with which magazines were identified, as well as the distinctive patterns of transatlantic imitation and quotation pursued by Franklin and Bradford, Gardner

offers a convincing rationale for why the periodical “with its regularity of publication, its spaces for direct interaction, and [its] practice of anonymous contributions” became “a favored form for provincial citizens seeking access to the textual commons of English letters” (39). Turning to the post-Revolutionary period, chapter 2 then further expands Gardner’s concern with the ideological function of the early American magazine by asking why it “was invested with [a] [...] national significance” at this point, despite being “something of a literary suicide mission” (70). The numerous challenges of economics and personnel confronting these magazines, which are as finely detailed in this section as they are in the rest of the book, did not deter “otherwise rational, ambitious, economical and pragmatic individuals” (69), Gardner suggests, because the “very logic of the magazine depended on a celebration of the importance of [...] unity [and] of centralized authority” (74) that closely accorded with the federalist feelings of the era. Thus, figures such as Isaiah Thomas, who published *The Massachusetts Magazine*, or Noah Webster, who self-consciously propounded on the “editorial labor involved in making a magazine” (73) while at the helm of *The American Magazine*, persisted with their endeavors because they imagined the magazine “to be a very different space from both newspaper and book: orderly, dispassionate, rational, interactive, open to all political persuasions” (78).

It is this interactive dimension which comes to the fore in chapter 3, where Gardner considers the readers, correspondents, and contributors to the post-Revolutionary magazine. Although he admits that “archival evidence about the demographics of magazine readers is all but impossible to pin down” (107), he offers some inspired guesswork in relation to this question alongside a more empirically thorough and theoretically sophisticated account of the reader as contributor. For as he notes:

One of the central ideals governing the early magazine [...] was that [it] should create a space whereby readers could themselves participate as writers. [...] It is important to recognize how deeply collaborative [...] the periodical space was meant to be, how very much it worked to collapse the distance between author and reader and create a space where both could converse as equals, overseen by the careful guidance of the editor. (103)

Pursuing this insight through the various phases of Judith Sargent Murray’s periodical career, Gardner effectively conveys “the *mise en abyme* of the periodical form” (125), within which “one text inspires another, which in turn inspires further responses, retorts, accusations, and imitations” (111) before switching his attention to Joseph Dennie, “the writer who would stake the most on a periodical career [and] an individual in many ways not temperamentally suited to the anonymity, neutrality, and cacophony of the form” (125). Accordingly, the fiercely partisan and shamelessly Anglophile manager of *The Port Folio*, who “longed for *his* voice, and not just his editorial vision, to predominate over the conversation” (131), serves as a kind of limit case in late eighteenth-century terms, as well as a harbinger of the more “authorial” magazine style which would emerge in the mid-nineteenth century—his is “an anomalous periodical career, although also one of the most distinguished and influential” (127).

It is, finally, into the uneasy transition from the post-Revolutionary period to the Age of Jackson that Gardner plunges us in his fourth chapter, which looks at the moves Susanna Rowson and Charles Brockden Brown made to periodical work in the early 1800s, before focusing upon Washington Irving’s *Salmagundi* as “simultaneously [the] culmination and [the] end” (163) of the early American magazine mindset. “We are inclined to see [in] the repeated turn of the first generation of American novelists to the magazine [...] apostasies, martyrdoms or personal tragedies” (145), Gardner observes of Rowson and Brown’s distancing of themselves from fiction in favor of engagements with *The Boston Weekly Magazine* and *The American Register* respectively. However, early American expressions of disillusionment with the novel are not always, as critics have tended to claim, instances of “latter-day Puritanism, cynical marketing, or subversive ventriloquism” (137), he argues—instead, writers like Rowson and Brown were genuinely attracted to “the possibilities of another model for a national literature that the magazine sought to provide” (136). Indeed, nowhere is this made clearer than in Gardner’s brilliant extended reading of *The American Register* as a continuation and amplification of the concerns found in Brown’s novels. Although this is the artifact from Brown’s career “most devoid of what we recognize as imaginative energies” (154), it is also “the site in which

he most fully experiments with his ideals for writer, reader, and the editorial function” (150). Irving’s parodic, non-interactive magazine work, on the other hand, explicitly refuses “the conventions and contracts that had long governed the form” (164), foreshadowing his eventual abandonment of the role of editor for that of the sketch artist.

If Irving represents a decisive turn toward antebellum conceptions of literature, however, Gardner’s own decision to foreground Rowson and Brown alongside him in this chapter perhaps points to a residual tension between authorial individualism and editorial collectivity that affects the book as a whole. After all, despite Gardner’s frequent and astute observations on the early American magazine as a “cacophonous, [and] largely anonymous form” (4), he chooses to focus on a series of remarkable, if generally understudied, “Names” (36). In this respect, he might have offered a little more “cold comfort to the literary historian, searching for clear authorial fingerprints” (140) by examining the trajectory of unattributable magazine material in greater detail or by embedding the pieces he does

discuss more deeply in the variegated surroundings of their initial appearance. Some of the most fascinating passages in the book, for example, are those which consider how the distinctive fictionality of Murray’s “Story of Margaretta” and Rowson’s “Sincerity” is a consequence of being “inseparably bound up with the practices and miscellaneous forms of the periodical” with its inevitable “fits and starts” (119). Still, it is all too easy to criticize pioneering books for not doing what someone else should already have done, when they are themselves trying to do so much. So I shall henceforward resist that temptation. Those who require a more complete analysis of how anonymity, juxtaposition, and seriality function in the early American magazine would be wise to use this monograph as their lodestone. If future studies of American periodical culture are as bold and as intelligent as Gardner’s book, then I am confident that the field of magazine studies will not meet the swift and unfair death so often meted out to the titles he examines.

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