

JENNA M. GIBBS, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 313 pp.

Over the last two decades, theater scholars such as Joseph Roach, Peter Reed, and Jeffrey Richards have studied early American theatrical culture as part of a circum- or transatlantic performance network. *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850* builds on the tradition of this scholarship. In focusing on two eighteenth-century theatrical centers, one in the Old World, the other in the New, Jenna M. Gibbs traces the impact of popular performance on and off the stage on political debates surrounding slavery, abolition, race, and class. She investigates how plays and other printed materials, such as images, cartoons, broadsides, poems, and songs travelled between London and Philadelphia, arguing that the permeability and exchange between print and performance “helped create a transatlantic lexicon of slavery and antislavery” (7). This lexicon, however, was not stable, but was influenced by specific local social and political dynamics and shifted considerably over the almost one hundred years the book covers. Gibbs’s skillful negotiation of the tension between local conditions and transatlantic exchanges is one of the book’s greatest strengths. Her argument is grounded in thorough research of cultural performance in London and Philadelphia while extrapolating from there how the transatlantic migration of printed materials shaped pro- and antislavery discourses in Britain, the early United States, and the British Atlantic at large.

In her first set of chapters, Gibbs explores the contested meaning of liberty and equality on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the American Revolution as embodied in the two neoclassical figures of Britannia and Columbia. Chapter one focuses on how the figure of Columbia inspired a symbolic repertoire of images and new performance traditions, such as “oral blackface,” that ridiculed black people and excluded them from the American republican project, and Columbia’s “Temple of Liberty.” Chapter two shows how Britons cast Britannia as an anti-slavery icon in reaction to the loss of the American colony. Gibbs demonstrates how stage performances and printed materials celebrating the 1807 abolition of the slave trade became invested with a pronounced

liberalism that conveniently ignored the continued practice of chattel slavery in the British colonies. In chapter three, Gibbs examines the role of Africa in British and American anti-slavery thought. She shows how ideas about race and the position of black people in society first articulated in missionary accounts, travel narratives, and scientific treatises seeped into poetry, drama, and contemporary imagery, which were in turn popularized through stage performances. While Britain consolidated its role as true arbiter of liberty by sending the navy to Africa in order to enforce the ban on the slave trade, Americans reconstructed their civic mythology of liberty by relocating free blacks to Africa so they could not disturb national harmony at home.

The next set of chapters focuses on two transatlantic performance genres that Gibbs describes as “variety burlesque” and “urban picaresque.” In chapter four, Gibbs traces the emergence of “urban picaresque” from its roots as a series of cartoons and images about social stratification in London to its dramatization and migration to Philadelphia, where it was adapted by cartoonist Charles Clay and turned into a critique of free black lifestyle. Gibbs convincingly argues that Clay’s cartoons produced the future minstrel stock character of the black dandy. Chapter five then turns to the “variety burlesque” and examines the role of other blackface and Yankee characters in the plays of Charles Mathews. Gibbs reads both the “urban picaresque” and the “variety burlesque” as precursors to blackface minstrelsy and emphasizes their contribution to a sustained transatlantic discourse on race, rights, and slavery.

Gibbs’s remaining chapters analyze more familiar figures, such as T. Daddy Rice’s minstrel character Jim Crow, William Montgomery Bird’s slave leader Spartacus, or the sensationalist author George Lippard. In chapter six, Gibbs juxtaposes Bird’s drama *The Gladiator* with T. Daddy Rice’s minstrel shows and analyzes them both in light of contemporary political events, such as the British Emancipation Act, sectional tension in the United States, and the European revolutions of the 1830s and 40s. She skillfully demonstrates how both works resonated with the competing sentiments of theater audiences on each side of the Atlantic, arguing that T. Daddy Rice’s blackface minstrel and the serious drama of Spartacus’s revolt constituted the “two symbolic halves of the discursive negotiations of Atlantic slavery,

liberty, and democracy” (212). Her closing chapter, then, looks specifically at the linkages between the causes of white industrial workers and enslaved blacks. Analyzing *Toussaint L'Ouverture; or, The Black Spartacus*, a play penned by the London dramatist George Dandin Pitt, and several works of Philadelphia novelist George Lippard, Gibbs interrogates the emergence of a transatlantic protest movement that was simultaneously anti-feudal, anti-capitalist, and anti-slavery.

Overall, Gibbs's impressive study provides a fresh look on the transatlantic circulation of printed materials, the cultural work these materials perform, and their political and social implications for eighteenth and nineteenth-century debates on slavery and abolition. Gibbs not only demonstrates how debates about slavery and race seeped into popular consciousness through performance, but also how these performances were crucial in shaping these very debates. Importantly, she examines both proslavery and antislavery discourses and teases out how they influence each other.

Gibbs analyzes a wide range of materials of various genres, such as plays, cartoons, broadsides, and poems, some of which are not usually associated with the theater. She does not privilege one genre over another, which brings considerable breadth to her study, but could prove puzzling to readers who expect a more sustained treatment of theater as a cultural

institution and its larger function in society. Gibbs's wide-ranging approach introduces the reader to many hidden linkages between Philadelphia and London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and provides a new understanding of the relations between theater and printed materials. At times, however, this breadth comes at the expense of a more detailed discussion of terminology and genre. For example, the characteristics of the two performance genres “urban picaresque” and “variety burlesque” are not fully fleshed out. Likewise, it would have been helpful if Gibbs had offered a more expansive explanation of what she means when she writes about the act of “performing” or “performance.”

These points should not take away from Gibbs's impressive accomplishment. Her book is rich in detail and relevant for multiple fields of scholarship. Her investigation of the political reach of popular entertainment in the British Atlantic intersects with studies on revolution, slavery, and abolition, the construction of racial discourses in print and performance, and the emergence of a British-American public sphere in the Atlantic world. *Performing the Temple of Liberty* undoubtedly constitutes an important contribution to the scholarship on print and performance culture in the British Atlantic.

Bonn

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