

**Jared Gardner.** *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2012, xi + 201 pp., \$ 50.00.

Over the last ten years, the digitisation of early American writings has made a plethora of newspapers, magazines and other similarly ephemeral publications accessible to scholars worldwide, regardless of their location. Those with an interest in early American studies have immensely profited from this unlocking of a textual archive that, while not affordable for all institutions, has much to offer and has remained largely unexplored, as experts hardly fail to point out.

To be sure, the basic work on early American periodicals was done in the twentieth century. Scholars such as Frank Luther Mott, who provided accounts of the development of American periodicals, secured the hard facts by unraveling the histories of individual magazines and periodical publishing as an historical phenomenon. Today, an increasing number of researchers devote themselves to the tracing and investigation of selected, more particular aspects of the periodical system, shedding light on their function embedded within larger literary developments, their implication in the formation of American journalism or the change of their medial properties over time (in the form of media history). Upon closer inspection it becomes obvious that while a lot seems to be commonly known about periodical publishing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is only since recently that the ramifications of periodical writing and publishing come to the fore as research projects in their own right. Thus, it has never been disputed that magazines had a major impact on the formation of particular genres in North America (most prominently the short story), that they affected the development of individual writers' careers, that they were an important platform for literary criticism and that they promoted the kind of literary self-reflectivity necessary for an American national literature to take shape. At the same time, not many scholars have made the effort to carefully investigate this unruly corpus of writing and to assess the role periodical publishing played for America's early literary culture.

Jared Gardner's *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* is one of the few book-length studies dedicated to periodical publishing in the United States of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gardner had for several years been the co-editor of *American Periodicals*, an academic journal devoted to the study of American periodical writing. His broad expertise allows him to draw upon a wide range of sources, focusing less on particular periodicals (as was done for example by William Free in *The Columbian Magazine and American Literary Nationalism* (1968) or more recently Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan in *Men of Letters in the Early Republic* (2008), where she explores Joseph Dennie's *The Port Folio*) than bringing to life their polyphony and diversity.

Gardner's approach situates periodical publishing within broader literary contexts and considers the conditions for writing that enabled and determined the development of magazines. He devotes an extensive first chapter to the discussion of the impact of periodical writing as a transatlantic phenomenon. Coffee house culture and other institutions of sociability provided a fertile ground for periodical publishing. The paradigm of politeness had swept across the Atlantic in the second half of the eighteenth century. British templates played an important role: periodicals had been thriving in Great Britain from the early eighteenth century onwards and the authoritative voice of a 'Mr Spectator' resounded in the United States, frequently imitated or plainly copied. Periodical publishing largely depended on the widespread practice of reprinting, and this aspect of the period's profound transatlantic dimension figures prominently in Gardner's portrayal of American magazine culture.

Admittedly, Gardner's discussion of this transatlantic phenomenon is not an entirely new addition to early American studies. Scholars such as David S. Shields and Paul Giles have opened up these backgrounds over the last ten years or so. However, Gardner's interest and main argument lie elsewhere. The history of magazine publishing, he argues, allows us to trace a counter-narrative to prevailing accounts of American literature, which tend to link its development to that of the novel as the genre traditionally most privileged in terms of scholarly interest. Hence Gardner begins his book with an introduction which is not so much concerned with the origins of periodical publishing (as one would expect), but in which he puts the magazine on a par with the early American novel. His discussion of the magazine as a medium with distinct qualities as well as an instrumental factor in the formation of an American literature stresses that its early forms had a lot in common with the magazine. Most importantly, this is what Gardner refers to as the "editorial function" (15), by which he means the co-ordinating task of the narrator particularly in the epistolary mode (his example is Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*) which resembles that of an editor (who bundles voices) more than that of an author (as the sole voice or origin of meaning). In fact, Gardner defines this kind of cacophony found in the early American novel as a decisive feature of the magazine, one that has always been its mark of distinction, but also the reason why the magazine eventually 'lost' against the novel, which managed to develop into the smoother and more streamlined narrative mode in the nineteenth century. Gardner's point is that there was a time when the magazine rivalled the novel, and that this competition could have just as well been 'won' by the magazine, which would have changed our concepts of literature. This is, of course, a vast and also rather speculative claim, a fact of which Gardner is well aware. He thus suggests a humble approach (38): his ambition is not to retell American literary

history counterfactually, but to understand why magazine culture could develop at all given the adversary conditions under which its makers had to work. He wants “to understand why these brilliant and rational individuals remained devoted to a form that looks, to our eyes at least, marginal, ephemeral, and most decidedly unprofitable” (38). So Gardner’s story is not an alternative grand narrative of the magazine, but one of failure. He provides an intriguing account of the “naïve” (95) motivation of editors, publishers and contributors, who inexhaustibly devised and created new publication projects despite the dismal outlook for periodicals, most of which were short-lived and abandoned at short intervals. Similarly to Meredith McGill, who, in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (2003), explores the phenomenon of reprinting as a productive mode worth investigating in its own right, or Patricia Okker, who in *Social Stories: The Magazine Novel in Nineteenth-Century America* (2003) examines the novel and its origins in serialized publishing, Gardner revisits antebellum literary culture and encourages his readers to reconsider conventional categories of literary analysis (such as ‘the work’ and ‘the author’), whose alternatives frequently remain obscure.

The story he recounts is an exciting one: he unravels networks of readers, writers and correspondents and the very human stories of hope, expectation and frustration that lay behind these magazines. Both structurally and conceptually Gardner has found the perfect format to reevaluate an aspect of American literary productivity that tends to be seen as elusive, confusing and precursory (i.e. preceding ‘real’ American literature, to refer to what Winfried Fluck discussed as the “Infancy Thesis” of American literature). In fact, like many other studies that have benefited from the transatlantic turn in American studies of the new century, Gardner’s book reshuffles the cards of American literary history and thereby shows that American literary culture was vibrant and diverse before the Age of Emerson. He describes this as a “remix[ing] [of] culture” (39), by which he means the unhinging of lines of demarcation between genres, media and approaches to writing. He finishes by comparing the cacophony of the early American literary marketplace to that of the blogosphere today. Our present time, of course, sees personalized authorship and the concomitant idea of unique genius and the unity of the work of art dwindle and replaced with collaborative, anonymous or virtual and often financially unrewarding forms of authorship on the internet. In a way then the internet is a regressive mode of publication. The literature that it produces links it back to the eighteenth century, a time before the novel took over, a less homogeneous time in terms of writing, whose full potential, one could infer from Gardner’s book, is about to be unfolded with a two centuries’ delay.

Gardner’s study is not a survey monograph and does not give the full picture of magazine publishing in eighteenth-century America. But the approach

he has chosen is intriguing and smart. This book can be thoroughly recommended to anyone who would like to see what can be done with this neglected corpus of writing, particularly to readers with an interest in the period, transatlantic literature, magazine publishing and the history of the media.

## Works Cited

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