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Book Review of Jared Gardner's *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture*

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A Review of Jared Gardner, *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. Print.

In *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), Jared Gardner calls for a critical reassessment of the field of early American literary studies, arguing that modern scholars of early American literature have neglected a profoundly influential force on the literature of the era: the magazine. Although the “anonymous, fragmentary, and discordant voices” of these early American magazines can be difficult for scholars to work with, Gardner argues that the study of magazines is essential in understanding the literature of this era, because for many of the early American writers, the magazine was a unique and powerful literary form, one which “came to be imagined as an ideal form on which to erect a new literary culture, one at once revolutionary and conservative, ‘original and American’ yet deeply English, radically inclusive yet rigorously organized, polyphonous yet unified” (4, 36-37).

Gardner identifies himself as “a historian of the early magazine,” but his work is clearly intended for literary scholars as well as historians (174). Many of Gardner’s primary source authors will be familiar to anyone who has studied the literature of the period, and include novelists such as Charles Brockden Brown, Susanna Rowson, Hannah Webster Foster, and William Hill Brown, as well as other noted authors. Gardner, despite suggesting that it is “perhaps time to start marginalizing...the novel” in early American literary studies in favor of the magazine, does not omit novels in his own discussion of the period, instead choosing to begin *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* with a chapter that explicitly explores the effects of the early American magazine on the novels of the time (4).

The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture serves both as a fairly persuasive argument as to the importance of the magazine in early American literature and as a readily accessible introduction to the field of the early American magazine. According to Gardner, this is a field that has often been overlooked by literary critics of the era, and indeed, Gardner references very few critics within the main body of his text, positioning most of his discussion of secondary sources within the work's endnotes. The few critics Gardner cites in the actual chapters include a number who have written specifically on early American magazines, such as David Paul Nord and Bryan Waterman, as well as influential scholars of the larger literary culture of the time, such as Cathy Davidson and Jay Fliegelman.

Gardner's book is clearly organized; he begins with an introductory chapter on why an understanding of the early American magazine culture is essential to studies of the literature of the period and then transitions into a fairly chronological discussion of "the Rise and Fall" of the early American magazine, from its origins in early eighteenth century British periodicals, to the development of American magazines in the colonial and early national eras, and finally to the fall of the early American magazine culture in the early nineteenth century and the rise of a new magazine model in the 1820s.

Gardner's introductory chapter, "The Literary Museum and the Unsettling of the Early American Novel," proposes a question that Gardner repeatedly returns to throughout his work: why do writers and publishers of this era seem so invested in magazines as a literary form, despite the fact that these early American magazines almost always ended rapidly in failure? As evidence of the interest that early novelists had in magazines, Gardner references the number of novelists, such as Charles Brockden Brown and Susanna Rowson, who ultimately "turned away from the novel form and dedicated themselves to magazine writing and editing" in their later

careers, a discussion Gardner returns to more fully in the following chapters (x). In this first chapter, however, Gardner's primary argument is that many of the "strange features" of early American novels are connected to the unique traits of the magazines of the time (7). Early American magazines were not structured around a central subject matter or audience demographic, but rather were collections of "miscellany" filled with "unattributed borrowings, fragmentary sketches, correspondences, transcripts, and opinions on everything from the French Revolution to the ethics of snuff" (2-3). Readers of these magazines were invited to contribute to the magazines, to engage in the public discussion of ideas on these varied subjects, by submitting their written essays, poems, or other literary endeavors to the magazine's editor, who may then choose to publish them. Gardner argues that early American novels were influenced by the traits of this magazine format in a number of ways, including the portrayal of the author or a particular character as an editor or compiler of the "documents" in the novel, rather than the creator of them; the frequent use of the epistolary style, which like the format of the early magazines, allows for multiple voices to be in dialogue with each other; and the tendency to blend genres and styles within these novels. Although Gardner's attempts to explain the "strange features" of early American novels by linking these traits to those of the early magazines is not his strongest argument of the book, this opening chapter does illustrate nicely Gardner's argument that the ideology and techniques of the "early American magazine culture" are more pervasive than is often realized (7).

Gardner's next chapter, "American Spectators, Tatlers, and Guardians: Transatlantic Periodical Culture in the Eighteenth Century," begins his roughly chronological discussion of the early American magazine's development through an examination of the British origins of the colonial American magazine. British periodicals such as *Guardian*, *Spectator*, *Tatler*, and the

later *Gentlemen's Magazine* all served as closely-followed models for the periodicals produced in colonial America, such as the *Pennsylvania Magazine* and Benjamin Franklin's short-lived *General Magazine*. Colonial American magazines did not have nearly the success that British periodicals had, however; most of the American magazines became significant financial burdens for their publishers and editors, and none lasted for more than three years (62).

However, Gardner does not view the financial failures of these colonial magazines, and the continued failure of magazines in the early national period, which Gardner discusses in his next two chapters, "The American Magazine in the Early National Period: Publishers, Printers, and Editors" and "The American Magazine in the Early National Period: Readers, Correspondents, and Contributors," as evidence that magazines are less important to studies of the literary history of this period than the more successful novels and newspapers also published at the time. Rather, Gardner argues that because so many individuals who were otherwise successful publishers and writers continually attempted to establish these magazines, knowing full well that they were embarking on a "literary suicide mission," they must have been impelled to do so by considerations other than a mere profit-making scheme (70). Gardner argues that these early magazine creators, editors, and contributors were united in an almost idealistic belief that these magazines, filled with "miscellany" and composed by reader-contributors, offered "a uniquely democratic space" which could serve as "the proper foundation for a literary culture in the new nation" (97, 98). Gardner's two chapters on the "Publishers, Printers, and Editors" and "Readers, Correspondents, and Contributors" of the magazines of the early national period offer a more extensive examination of the contents of these magazines than is found in Gardner's other chapters, and examples such as the Judith Sargent Murray and Sarah Wentworth Morton

contributions to the *Massachusetts Magazine* illustrate well his arguments about the potential for magazines to serve as a space for community discussion.

Gardner's final major chapter, "The Early American Magazine in the Nineteenth Century: Brown, Rowson, and Irving" examines the careers of Charles Brockden Brown and Susanna Rowson, who both gained their fame through writing novels, but both chose to write in periodicals in their later careers instead, a "turn to anonymous periodical work" that Gardner claims "was in large measure due to increasing doubts about the politics of the novel form" (136). Gardner suggests that both Rowson and Brown chose to work in magazines, not because their circumstances would not permit them to continue writing novels, but rather because they valued the magazine ideology and format above those associated with the novel, an explanation for their similar career trajectories that Gardner states modern literary scholars often overlook because they fail to account for the powerful attraction that "the motley and cacophonous quality of these magazines" held for early American writers (3). Gardner closes this chapter with a discussion of Washington Irving and his works, particularly the *Sketch Book* and the magazine *Salmagundi*, the latter of which Gardner states, "marks an important moment in the history of the periodical culture I have been tracing, simultaneously its culmination and its end" (163). Gardner then briefly traces the rise of the new form of the magazine that gained prominence in the 1820s, which unlike the earlier periodicals focused on a specific audience or subject matter, restricted the dynamics between contributors and their readers, and was less concerned with "offering a model for the literary and political foundations of the new nation" than serving "as a refuge *from* the realities of nation-building" (169). Gardner closes his book with a short conclusion, in which he reiterates several of his major points and then suggests certain "parallels between eighteenth-century magazine culture and twenty-first-century Internet culture" (x).

Gardner's *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture* is a well-written examination of the understudied field of early American magazines, readily comprehensible even to those who lack familiarity with early American periodicals. At times, Gardner's privileging of the early American magazine over the more successful literary forms of the novel and newspaper can seem in danger of being unnecessarily excessive, such as in his description of Charles Brockden Brown's novels as an "apprenticeship...for his true career" as a periodical writer, but although the reader may not always agree with Gardner's broadest conclusions regarding the influence of these magazines, Gardner certainly provides persuasive evidence to support his assertions that the early American magazine mattered greatly to those who contributed to it and that the magazine was a far more significant force in early American literature than is commonly understood (89, 172).