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Review

Richard Squibbs, *Urban Enlightenment and the Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay: Transatlantic Retrospects*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 234 pp. ISBN: 9781137378231, € 72,99.

In this comprehensive analysis of the periodical essay in Britain and the United States during the long eighteenth century, Squibbs convincingly demonstrates that this literary genre is an often overlooked but nevertheless important part of Enlightenment literary culture. Hitherto, the novel has received the attention of literary scholars as the quintessential literary form of the eighteenth century, yet Squibbs points out that contemporary British and American critics agreed that the periodical essay was their century's signal contribution to world literature. Squibbs begins with an overview of the periodical essay in the eighteenth century, remarking that to appreciate why contemporaries held the genre in such high regard, one must realize that these single-topic, single-sheet texts were seen as passing on civic wisdom in a tradition stretching back to antiquity. He goes on to trace the genealogy of the periodical essay in the second chapter, noting the popularity of Theophrastus's character sketches in seventeenth-century England and the

transformation of Theophrastus by translators and commentators into a moral philosopher. In the third chapter, Squibbs outlines the importance of Jean de La Bruyère's *Characters, or the Manners of the Age* (1688) for the early periodical essay, as La Bruyère transformed character writing in his close examination of courtly and city life, teaching posterity to see moral significance in the everyday. La Bruyère and the Theophrastan tradition were thus fundamental in shaping the nature of early periodical essays, such as *Tatler*, *World*, and *Spectator* – the essayists viewed their work as vehicles for diffusing principles of morality and good character to a broad readership. A significant shift occurred in periodical essay writing in England between the 1750s and 1780s, as Squibbs writes that authors became disillusioned with the task of creating a self-reflective literary public and so turned their attention to posterity. The result was the creation of a literary public that parallels the better-known republic of letters of the philosophes, but rather than engaging in scientific or philosophical debate, these essayists created comical sketches of characters in urban life.

The final three chapters are case studies of significant periodical essay publications that have not yet received

sufficient attention according to Squibbs – Henry Mackenzie’s *Mirror and Lounger* in Edinburgh, *Port Folio* in Philadelphia, and Washington Irving’s *Salmagundi* in Manhattan. In the Scottish case, most of the essayists were trained as lawyers and Squibbs argues that the periodical essay gave the Scottish lawyers an outlet to promote civic virtue in a society where many felt that the law was ‘a mere adjunct to commercial interests.’ The majority of contributors to Philadelphia’s *Port Folio* were also lawyers, and mostly from the Federalist political camp, who used the periodical essay to counter what they perceived as the anti-intellectualism of the Jeffersonian republicans. Just as in England, the *Port Folio* contributors promoted an idea of citizenship in literary terms that was mainly directed at posterity, as they became disillusioned with their political situation. To compete with the prominence of Philadelphia and Boston in intellectual and cultural life, Washington Irving started the periodical essay *Salmagundi* in 1807 in Manhattan, a publication that satirized American populism and criticized the culture of consumption in New York’s hectic urban center. Despite the disillusionment many essayists felt with their specific political and social environment, Squibbs convincingly argues that, as thinkers of the Enlightenment, they envisioned a literary public in which reading and conversation were considered morally enriching practices.

While Squibbs’s analysis is insightful and enriches our understanding of the eighteenth-century literary world in all its diversity, his study is occasionally burdensome in its detail. His afterword is the most eloquently written and

cogently argued part of the book and leaves the reader with the feeling that the questions he deals with here should have been given more attention in the body of the work. In the afterword, he engages with the work of prominent scholars from the field of eighteenth-century studies, mainly postcolonial scholars such as Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown, but also philosophers and historians who have problematized the grand narrative of the emergence of modernity, such as Dror Wahrman, J.G.A. Pocock, and Charles Taylor. Squibbs writes that one of our foremost tasks as eighteenth-century studies scholars should be to ‘defamiliarize the eighteenth century’ in order to avoid the pitfalls of teleological views of the emergence of modernity and convinces the reader in arguing that this will open up new ways of imagining the experience of self and society. However, he misreads Wahrman’s work by arguing that his research on the emergence of modern gender and racial identities confutes the idea of a ‘watershed moment’ in the establishment of modernity – Wahrman clearly presents the American Revolution as a watershed moment in the creation of modern identity frameworks.

Squibbs’s claim that fixation on the novel has obscured our view of how many eighteenth-century men and women experienced the literary culture of their age is convincing, but he does not give any quantitative information on the popularity of the periodical essays he discusses. The single citation of works that contain this information is surely insufficient given the importance he attaches to periodical essays in various national contexts. There also seems to be an in-

consistency in his overall argument, as in his introduction he states that one of the distinctive features of the periodical essay is its apolitical character and explicit cultural orientation, yet some of the English, Scottish, and certainly the American examples he discusses clearly adopt a political stance. Squibbs fails to explain how or why the periodical essay became politicized in certain periods and contexts. He often refers to ‘urban Enlightenment’ as being a term that periodical essayists engaged with but fails to inform the reader if they actually used this term, which I suspect they did not, and if not, then what term(s) they did use.

Despite these issues, Squibbs has

delivered on his promise to shed light on lesser-known works that enrich our understanding of eighteenth-century literary culture in all its diversity, and has demonstrated that these essayists were important commentators on an emergent modernity in which print and the cultivation of taste and manners were deemed crucial. He firmly situates these essays in their social and political contexts, which is all the more impressive since he deals with more than a century of history in England, Scotland, and the United States.

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