Conference Reviews

Histories of Print, Manuscript, and Performance in America

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PRINT, MANUSCRIPT, AND PERFORMANCE:
PROSPECTS FOR EARLY AMERICAN STUDIES

In the 2005 James Russell Wiggins Lecture delivered at the American Antiquarian Society conference “Histories of Print, Manuscript, and Performance in America,” Sandra Gustafson suggested that a “stadial theory” of production has implicitly informed understandings of the development of print culture: just as theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment proposed that civilization developed in a series of well-defined, progressively improving states, so, too, have we tended to imagine an ascending technological line of development from oral communication, to hand-lettered manuscript, to the advent of the printing press and current technologies of mass communication and digitization. According to Gustafson, this is a developmental narrative that we might do well to question. For instance, oral communication does not disappear in the age of print; rather, it coexists with print, and indeed, assumes a new role in relation to print culture. Gustafson’s argument is significant insofar as it reflects a line of thought that has emerged quite powerfully from the “history of the book” studies that have emanated from the American Antiquarian Society in the past 20 years: namely, that the privileged artifact of print culture—the book—is less meaningful as a finished object than as a process.

The close scrutiny of the material production of the book to which scholars of the history of the book have subjected early American texts has had the curious effect of deconstructing the book as a solid and identifi-
able object—rendering the book less a coherent, reproducible item than a series of moments or scenes, including scenes of writing, production, advertising, circulation, reading, and reprinting. Indeed, one might construe these scenes as a series of performances or a set of enacted relations (staged between writer and publisher, between author and readership, between bookseller and consumer, between critic and reading public) that define a book as something far different from a lapidary text that retains its meaning from first printing through twenty-first-century incarnation as a Norton critical edition assigned in the college classroom. The term “performance”—nestled within the title of the recent American Antiquarian Society conference—thus gestures toward the study of dramatic and theatrical performance in early America, but also locates, more broadly, a performative dimension within book production and reception that disrupts the solidity of the text. As such, the rubric of performance, in relation to the history of the book, points to the many scenes of meaning-making embedded within book history and raises questions, both historical and methodological, as to how scholars might collect and analyze evidence of these scenes.

The question of how to recuperate the elusive performative relations that inform culture-making at particular historical moments is one that has both energized and bedeviled scholars of early American drama for some time. The solid fact of the text has never offered much certainty to critics and historians working in the field of theater studies: clearly, scripts are important to dramatic performance but do not tell the whole story of how meaning is conveyed at a given theatrical event. Indeed, scholarship in this field has suffered from both the excess circulation of texts—from a redundancy of play books, prompt copies, and scripts that generate a lack of clarity as to the provenance, authorship, and stability of dramatic texts over time—and from a textual absence—that is, from the lack of an extant script corresponding to a reported performance or the lack of a definitive version of a given script.

Consider, for instance, the history of a play such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *Pizarro*. First performed in London in 1799, the play appeared within months on the U.S. stage and in multiple print editions: it was subsequently performed every season save one in New York City from 1800 to 1863 (see Matlaw). Sheridan’s play was itself an adaptation of a translation of August Von Kotzebue’s play *Die Spanier in Peru, oder Rolla’s Tod*—
a play that critiqued the imperial ambitions of Pizarro in his invasion of Peru and celebrated Inca resistance in the figure of the warrior Rolla. Interestingly, portions of Rolla’s most famous speech galvanizing the Peruvian army to resist the Spanish invaders in Pizarro were borrowed directly from Sheridan’s own parliamentary speeches delivered at the impeachment trial of the former British governor general of Bengal, Warren Hastings. Sheridan’s version of Pizarro thus makes reference both to colonial scenes in the Americas and in India (see Loftis and Suleri). A further, intriguing, restaging of the colonial politics at stake in the play occurred in 1821 when the African Company—the first African American theater company in the United States—performed Pizarro in New York City.¹ Notable, as well, is the similarity between Pizarro and the well-known American play Metamora (1829)—a tragic melodrama that served as the star vehicle for the “muscular” embodiment of American manhood on the nineteenth-century stage, Edwin Forrest. Metamora was written by John Augustus Stone and had been commissioned by Forrest by way of a contest designed to encourage the development of “indigenous” American drama. Stone, who had apparently seen Forrest perform the part of Rolla some years earlier, wrote Metamora for the contest and won the prize: Metamora borrows heavily from the plot of Pizarro, transposing the Peruvian Inca hero Rolla into the Native American chief Metamora.² In its similarity to Pizarro, it is thus evident that the “indigenous” drama Forrest commissioned was itself based upon representations of Native Americans originating in a theatrical history written by the British (Irish-born) Sheridan and the German Kotzebue and that the ideologies of colonialism at stake in Metamora owe much to the Spanish invasion of Peru and the English invasion of the West Indies and the East Indies, as well as English debates over the slave trade in the late eighteenth century.

The complex and intriguing history of authorship and performance of Pizarro and Metamora indicates the difficulty of understanding either play as a discrete literary object with an author whose identity locates the work clearly within a national canon of literature. As Loren Kruger observed 10 years ago, against a criterion of canon-formation oriented around the idea of the literary work, “dramatic texts look insufficiently literary or only impurely and illegitimately autonomous” (699). Against a field of study historically defined by a national frame, plays performed in early America—largely written by British authors—also often appear insufficiently Ameri-
can. Yet placed in relation to contemporary developments in the field of literary and historical studies—including history of the book scholarship, as well as transatlantic studies and cultural studies—the complexities and uncertainties that formerly appeared to be a liability for the study of theatrical performance may now prove to be a source of largess. The multiple renditions and performances of a dramatic text, in varied colonial and national contexts, may serve less to disqualify this series of scenes as sites of study than to indicate the exemplary nature of drama for understanding the diffuse moments that comprise the literary object and the far-flung geopolitical contexts that inform literary works in the colonial and early national periods.

Groundbreaking work in the field of transatlantic and hemispheric theater and performance studies has been undertaken by scholars such as Joseph Roach and Diana Taylor. Americanist scholarship in the field of drama is migrating from an obscure corner of the realm to a more visible position: one might note both the strength of the work delivered at the AAS conference by scholars such as Heather Nathans, Jeffrey Richards, Lucy Rinehart, and Katherine Wilson, as well as recent excellent articles in *Early American Literature* by scholars including Sean X. Goudie, Joseph Fichtelberg, and Jenny Hale Pulsipher. At the intersection of performance theory, book history, and cultural studies, theater emerges as an intriguing and rich site for the study of transatlantic cultural transmission, the formation of bodies politic in cultural settings, and the multiple sites at which texts assume embodied meaning. The theater has historically been linked to promiscuity, associated with sexual excess as well as the possibility of socially transgressive performance by both actors and audience members: one might argue that early American drama is promiscuous with respect to literary and historical categories of scholarship as well, but precisely this promiscuity has much to offer for thought as to the categories we employ and our ability and desire to exceed them as well.

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**NOTES**

1. On the African theater in New York City, see McAllister 3, and Thompson.
2. For discussion of *Pizarro* as a source for Stone’s *Metamora*, see McConachie 98–99.
WORKS CITED


Matlaw, Myron. "'This is Tragedy!!' The History of *Pizarro*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 43.3 (1957): 288–94.


