

The Americas: Recent Scholarship and Trends

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Abstract: This article surveys recent research and writings about the long eighteenth century on genres that include poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography, slave narrative, travel narrative and the novel on both traditional topics, such as religion and history, and on emerging fields of research, such as literature and medicine, and an interest in expanding boundaries to include Transatlantic, Caribbean and West Indies studies. Throughout, a combination of active curiosity, intense archival research and an interdisciplinary approach has given rise to exciting scholarship and engaging scholarly interaction.

Keywords: Early American literature, transatlantic, American Revolution, Enlightenment

Early American writings have always been richly varied as they encompass a broad sweep of experiences and events, from the initial contact with the North American continent to the founding of a new nation. Expressed in exploration narrative, history, sermon, spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, slave narrative, travel narrative, poetry, fiction and drama, early American writings invite multifaceted, interdisciplinary study, as scholars examine literary elements and situate writings within larger social and intellectual contexts. Scholarship is both comprehensive and innovative, with new ways of looking at traditional topics such as religion alongside emerging fields of research such as literature and medicine. Throughout, a combination of active curiosity, intense archival research and an interdisciplinary approach has given rise to exciting scholarship and engaging scholarly conferences that reflect increased interest in expanding boundaries that includes transatlantic, Caribbean and West Indies studies. Teaching early American literature has, in turn, become quite energised by these new approaches to researching and writing about these early texts. Reflecting these developments, several literary anthologies over the past decade have expanded the canon with readings across genre and regions that reflect this growing interest in early American studies and illustrate this diversity.¹ The very act of exchanging information that was so lively and essential in the period itself has thus carried over into the study of the period, as scholars are eager to learn about new research and interested to find out

what people are working on. From these collective efforts early American studies continue to be appreciated in their own right rather than simply as a precursor to another era. Some examples follow of recent scholarship and trends in the American long eighteenth century, c.1680-1820, organised by genre and subject.

Studies in early American poetry continue to include major poets from the colonial period, such as Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, and from the Revolutionary era and early national period, such as Joel Barlow, Timothy Dwight and Phillis Wheatley. Scholarly editions, concordances and anthologies offer important contributions to our understanding of this extensive and diverse body of work.² Elegy, commemoration and celebration are also the study of recent collections and publications. Since the publication in 1997 of the commonplace book compiled by Milcah Martha Moore (1740-1829), which includes the poetry of Susanna Wright and Hannah Griffiths, recent studies have expanded on these poets and their importance to the local Philadelphia literary community. David S. Shields's comprehensive collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry, in turn, includes many poets who have not been widely anthologised: for example, Jane Colman Turell, Annis Boudinot Stockton, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton and Margaretta Bleecker Faugères.³

Recent works on early American drama examine the cultural and political aspects of the theatre as it addresses Revolutionary-era subjects and with consideration for both audience and production. Heather S. Nathans and Jeffrey H. Richards, for example, provide comprehensive studies of the dynamic interaction between theatre and society. Nathans's recent work on African-American theatre offers new areas of study and research that expand our understanding of eighteenth-century drama and early American culture in interesting ways.⁴

From Cathy N. Davidson's landmark study *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), which situated the novel within early American print culture and the history of the book, recent scholarship on the novel considers elements of sympathy, sentiment and the gothic.⁵ The expansive quality of Charles Brockden Brown's subject matter and style is apparent in the numerous books and collections of essays that address the social, political and literary components, along with Brown's newspaper and editorial work.⁶ Susanna Haswell Rowson's novel *Charlotte Temple* (1791) continues to generate great interest. Marion Rust's *Prodigal Daughters: Susanna Rowson's Early American Women* (2008) and her recent Norton critical edition of *Charlotte Temple* show new ways to consider this now classic tale.⁷ Studies on the early American novel are thus thriving, especially on the works of Brown, Rowson, Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) and Leonora Sansay, whose *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St Domingo and Laura* (1808) was recently edited by Michael Drexler. The sentimental novel, with its address of gender relations, female education, moral and virtue, remains the

focus of numerous articles and books, along with several authoritative editions. Studies of Washington Irving's fiction and James Fenimore Cooper's novels, in turn, provide fascinating perspectives on the transitions from the founding of the new nation to the antebellum period.⁸

In addition to scholarship that focuses on literary genre, there are numerous recent studies on topics that address identity, race, class, gender and transatlantic connections.⁹ Early African American studies, for example, include works on both individual writers and social context. For instance, Vincent Carretta's biography of Olaudah Equiano (2005) provides extensive background for Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), as well as context on the transatlantic slave trade throughout the long eighteenth century.¹⁰ Gordon M. Sayre's work on early American and French explorers and traders and their interaction with Native peoples has expanded Native Studies westward from the eastern seaboard. Native Studies in general includes many new approaches, as the recently edited collection by Kristina Bross and Hilary E. Wyss so aptly illustrates.¹¹ Studies about empire are also of great interest, with examinations of British colonial encounters, European struggles for domination and a focus on borderlands, as addressed in recent works. Early Caribbean studies have been expanding since the publication of Thomas W. Krise's anthology *Caribbeana*, as have West Indies studies, as in, for example, Sean X. Goudie's *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (2006).¹²

Gender studies are very active, with works focusing on literary, historical and political aspects. Issues of gender and race are addressed in Sharon M. Harris's *Executing Race: Early American Women's Narratives of Race, Society, and the Law* (2005). Women's education is the topic of several new works, including Mary Kelley's study of women, education and public life in early America, *Learning to Stand and Speak* (2006). Male friendship and social networks of both genders, including the social clubs and literary salons of Philadelphia, New York and Boston, have inspired several studies: for example, Bryan Waterman's analysis of the Friendly Club of New York, *Republic of Intellect* (2007), and Ivy Schweitzer's *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (2006). In addition, recent works have addressed the body and sexuality and the men and women who challenged social norms in both literary and social spheres.¹³

Early American studies have also been invigorated by meticulous archival research in several areas, such as the continued investigation of the history of the book – as we learn how books were made, distributed and read, along with how taste influenced the literary marketplace and studies on printers, booksellers and readership.¹⁴ Geographical realms offer new studies on cartography and discovery.¹⁵ Travel literature has also engaged rigorous scholarly attention.¹⁶ Recent studies on the sociability of public houses, tavern-keeping and foodways – including culinary practices and the way in which foods were historically produced, transported and consumed – have all generated fascinating new work.¹⁷

Interest in nature and the environment have, in turn, produced recent works about William and John Bartram, medicinals, gardens, science and geography.¹⁸ Studies on the middling and planter classes have intersected with studies on material culture in several works.¹⁹ Expanding research on information networks and an avid interest in letter-writing have generated numerous studies on oratory and epistolarity. In both monographs and collections, letters and correspondence are being addressed in terms of style and content, as well as their actual exchange and the economics of letter-writing. Mercy Otis Warren's correspondence, for example, is the focus of a recently edited edition by Sharon M. Harris and Jeffrey H. Richards that provides valuable perspectives on early American culture and politics.²⁰

Religious studies have been invigorated of late, with a renewed interest in scriptural exegesis and historical context, so that we are learning even more specifically about the central role of religiosity in the lives of eighteenth-century Americans. Studies of the Quakers, pietism, Cotton Mather and the Salem witchcraft trials continue to engage students and scholars alike. The rise of the evangelical movement in America, as ushered in by the Revd George Whitefield and others, and later known as the Great Awakening, is another fascinating focus of several recent works.²¹

Early American studies in the long eighteenth century have also been examining and reconsidering the influence of Enlightenment ideals, such as representative government and contract law, along with an appreciation for experiential knowledge and sensory observation and an interest in sentiment and emotion.²² In this regard, the Revolutionary era and the founders have remained of great interest, with a focus on major figures such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Paine. With the 300th anniversary of Franklin's birth commemorated in 2006, Franklin studies continues to grow and develop and have attracted literary scholars, historians and the general public to produce a rich collection of sources and materials. Examples include J. A. Leo Lemay's authoritative study on Franklin and Carla Mulford's forthcoming study on Franklin and empire. Recent work on Jefferson includes his roles as statesman, bibliophile, naturalist, slaveholder and plantation owner. The latter category is most recently addressed in Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008). There are also numerous biographies on John Adams and a continued interest in the letters of John and Abigail Adams, among the many other new works on the founders and the Revolution.²³

Early American literary scholarship has long appreciated the archive, and scholars continue to discover new materials and to read familiar texts in new ways. With the increased digitisation of the archive, which enhances preservation efforts, there is potential for greater access. In this regard, the digitised database of Early American Imprints, for example, provides a more convenient option for viewing texts previously available only on microfilm or in manuscript in select research facilities. Although the database allows for these materials to be distributed more conveniently, the issue of access has

been widely discussed with regard to cost, which often presents a barrier to the very access that the databases offer. As a result, access beyond the large research institutions is currently being addressed.

The field of early American studies continues to invite new approaches to literary texts that reflect the various interests in literature, history, art, science, medicine, religion, biography and material culture, and which span geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Scholarship is subsequently thriving as we move forward and continue our investigations and examinations of the American long eighteenth century.

NOTES

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