

William D. Brewer, *Staging Romantic Chameleons and Imposters*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 255. \$90. ISBN 9781137389213.

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. 368. Pb. \$26.95. ISBN 9780822353415.

Thirty years ago, in her groundbreaking *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (1986), Terry Castle presented the masquerade as a popular institution and a cultural metaphor that cast ‘the true self [as] elusive and inaccessible – illegible – within its fantastical encasements’ (4). More recently, Lisa A. Freeman, in *Character’s Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (2002), argued that eighteenth-century theatrical character represented not a person but a vital trope. Building upon Castle’s insights, Freeman identified eighteenth-century culture as inherently theatrical: one ‘where the all-consuming interest of society in the mobilities of character could be tested and explored and where identity itself could be understood as a public property rather than a private or privatized concern of the subject’ (237). Both scholars articulated a relationship between performance, the theatre and society that continues to evolve in new and thought-provoking directions.

One of these new works is William D. Brewer’s *Staging Romantic Chameleons and Imposters*, which raises relevant questions about the ‘fantastical encasements’ (Castle, 4) of identity in the Romantic theatre. One of its strengths is its extensive catalogue of references to chameleons and imposters in literature, political tracts, and the theatre during the period, especially with regard to the playwrights, Richard Cumberland, Thomas Holcroft, Hannah Cowley, Mary Robinson and James Kenney. The chameleon metaphor is particularly suggestive in that it blurs the boundary between the human and the non-human animal. The reader might relate this metaphor to Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), and consider, as David Clark has in his article, ‘What Remains to Be Seen: Animal, Atrocity, Witness’ (in *Yale French Studies*, 2015), what it means to fall under an animal’s prowling gaze in the midst of era’s well-known atrocities: to name just a few, slavery, the Napoleonic wars, and the acts of genocide committed during the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. But Brewer does not identify these characters as potential silent witnesses, and it is unfortunate that he does not develop this metaphor in this way. This has less to do with the texts he chooses to write about than it does with his focus on the fundamental fluidity of the metaphor. Brewer confines his ‘slippery and versatile metaphor’ (18) almost exclusively to discussions of authenticity as is suggested in the titles to chapters 3, 4, and 6: ‘Thomas Holcroft’s Politicized Imposter and Sycophantic Chameleon’, ‘Fluid Identities in Hannah Cowley’s Universal Masquerade’ and ‘James Kenney’s Opportunistic, Reformatory, and Imitative Chameleons’.

Another evocative concept that Brewer deploys in this book is that of the polygraph. He introduces the idea in Chapter 4 in a discussion about Hannah Cowley and the masquerade and develops it in Chapter 5, ‘Mary Robinson’s Polygraphs’. Here, referring to Robinson’s *Walsingham*, Brewer defines the polygraph as an imitator, and then traces the word’s meaning to the Greek, where, he explains it means ‘writing much’ (141). By the eighteenth century, he notes, ‘the word could signify a copying device, an individual who writes on many subjects, and a person who imitates or looks identical to another’ (141). Once again, Brewer’s metaphor is embarrassingly rich with possibilities. The polygraph represents another nexus point between the

human and the nonhuman, in this case, between the human and the machine. Brewer focuses mostly on the mechanics of repetition through acts of imitation and even touches on the important issues of plagiarism and counterfeiting, but does not fully develop the potential to discuss actors as automatons or as a mirror-like apparatuses through which the audience views itself or the larger society. In many ways, *Staging Romantic Chameleons and Imposters* represents a hall of mirrors wherein images of imposters, chameleons and polygraphs are reflected upon in a series of close readings. While Brewer emphasizes the pervasive theatricality of British Romanticism in terms of a 'spectacular world [...] of relentless self-fashioning' (Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre* 218), he does not, like Castle or Moody, situate these observations within a larger historical or cultural context. Brewer's work would also have benefited from a more active engagement with contemporary discussions about the human/animal nexus and the philosophy of science. These ideas would have helped him develop his rich metaphors into some type of cultural commentary on either the Romantic theatre or the significance of character fluidity in this tempestuous era.

In *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849*, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon shifts the conventional geographical focus from Britain to the circum-Atlantic region, marking critical 'turning points in the history of popular sovereignty and theatrical performance in the Atlantic world' (2). As with many transatlantic and circum-Atlantic studies, Dillon extends and complicates the temporal framework of conventional literary and historical periods, creating a long eighteenth century that begins with the execution of Charles I at Whitehall in 1649 and concludes with the 1849 Astor Place Riot that took place in New York City. The beheading of Charles I, Dillon argues, raised the curtain on a new type of performance that held the stage for two centuries throughout the Atlantic rim. Instead of examining how the theatre destabilized identity constructions, Dillon's book emphasizes how New World theatres and their performances transformed subjects into citizens. The story of the loss of the commons, as the shared property of the English people since the sixteenth century, is transformed in Dillon's study to one about the 'virtualization' of the commons from land to a political practice, which, she writes, 'appears forcefully in the space of the theatre in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world' (3). The theatre functioned as a cultural nexus, providing a physical space where both the body and the voice of the people materialized through performances occurring on and offstage. These productions mobilized the 'promiscuous' social energies of the multitude, but they ultimately succumbed to the forced enclosure of the theatres through legal interventions that brought about its privatization in the aftermath of the Astor Place Riot.

Dillon incorporates multiple geographical locations into her narrative, effectively reproducing the network of colonial relations between London, Charleston, Kingston and New York City. Emphasizing mobility, assemblages and the theatre as a dynamic site for cultural production, Dillon provides her readers with an alternative, wide-ranging perspective that does not confine the cultural imaginary to the commonplace historical constructions of nation, race or even those of the theatre. Adapting Joseph Roach's concept of circum-Atlantic performance in *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Jürgen Habermas's study of the public sphere as well as Jacques Rancière's important work on the relationship between the aesthetic and politics, Dillon maps the construction and the transformation of 'colonial relations' throughout the Atlantic region. Dillon's first chapter is devoted to formulating this pivotal concept. She uses it to refer to the colonial economic structures at the heart of modern capitalism and to other structures of the 'intimate distance' (23) between the colonized and the colonizer that both shaped and racialized relations between Africans, Europeans and native peoples. The construction of political freedom,

Dillon notes, is intimately tied to ‘a shadow economy of dispossession, specifically, the dispossession of property (from Native Americans) and labor (from New World Africans) that fuels the property ownership regimes of metropolitan and creole Europeans. The colonial relation [...] renders the scene of expropriative violence in the colony “invisible” (distant, dismissable, nonpertinent) to those who reap its economic and political benefits’ (8). Following Rancière, Dillon unveils the tangible political stakes of representational strategies and, brilliantly adapting Giorgio Agamben’s idea of *homo sacer* or bare life, she illustrates how ‘bare labor’ has existed under the forces of erasure at the core of modern capitalism: undermining the rights of enslaved Africans, disenfranchising creole Europeans and displacing indigenous peoples while simultaneously allowing for what Orlando Patterson has referred to as their ‘social death’ (*Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 1982). *New World Drama* is an important, field-changing study. Dillon challenges and encourages her readers to revisit familiar theoretical and historical models while at the same time expanding what it means to be interdisciplinary and transnational.

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