

Richard Squibbs, *Urban Enlightenment and the Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay: Transatlantic Retrospects*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2014. Pp. 234. £50. ISBN 9781137378231.

This lively and important book attempts to tell an old story in a new way. The significance of the periodical essay to the development of eighteenth-century British literature (and to eighteenth-century life more generally) has been a critical mainstay for some time; few scholars and teachers would omit to mention the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* in their accounts of the period. Richard Squibbs does not ignore these two publications, but he does ask his readers to look behind, around and beyond them, to the host of classical models, contemporary responses, and transatlantic echoes that they draw upon or influence. What emerges is a fascinating portrait of a genre that might, if critics like Squibbs have their way, displace the novel as the arch-genre of the period in scholarly minds.

A particular strength of Squibbs's work is the effort he puts into defining the genre he wishes to examine. 'Periodical', 'magazine', 'journalism', 'essay' and 'history' are all useful terms, but the overlap between them and the potential imprecision of each term can hinder our understanding of what eighteenth-century writers were attempting when they composed periodical essays. Squibbs relies on both production elements and literary qualities to clarify his 'single-sheet, single-topic format' (3), generated by a fictional persona who addressed himself to 'subjects of manners, of taste, and of literature' (3). This clarification does not simply provide workable parameters for what is potentially a vast study; it also points to the symbolic value of the periodical essay as an attempt to counter the distractions and trivialities of the eighteenth-century press with a simple, sustained discussion that would continue to be useful to (and was, in some cases, explicitly aimed at) generations of future readers.

The contrasting temporalities of the periodical essay make for some of the most stimulating conclusions in Squibbs's book. On the one hand, periodical essays were of their moment, directed at improving the moral literacy of readers whom the essayists themselves often wearily admitted were unlikely to manifest much improvement. It is just this immediacy that made the essays so attractive to the nineteenth-century readers who canonized them and who felt transported to the previous century by their style and content. Yet, the essayists also made it explicit that they were situating themselves within a classical tradition by producing what Squibbs calls 'a modern variant of a tradition of urbane moral history writing that had originated in ancient Athens' (4), and that they were also hoping that their essays, particularly when collected into popular bound collections, would educate later readers who also wished to tap into this tradition.

One persistent feature of the essay, wherever it was attempted, was the presence of 'characters' – sketches of contemporary types, from the speaker of the essay to the people that they met and described. In two detailed chapters, Squibbs traces the history of the idea of the 'character' through key classical and seventeenth-century sources. These characters populate the essays but also serve as mouthpieces for a debate about contemporary individuality that deeply influenced periodical writers. The apparently shallow self-interest of their readers was one of the essayists' chief targets, as they attempted to deepen their audience's sense of the present moment's place within the currents of history.

Mid-century essayists, meanwhile, were faced with a new challenge: how to use the periodical essay to combat shortcomings in the public's reading habits and interests that were often thought to have been caused by the periodical essay itself. The integration of periodical reading into a fashionable lifestyle had robbed the essay of some of its transformative potential; periodicals were just one more part of what Squibbs calls 'a welter of media overstimulation and a corresponding climate of general distraction' (81). Civic-minded

bloggers might recognize this pattern, in which the medium they employ is itself part of the culture they rail against.

The final chapters of this book demonstrate how such ideas travelled to Scotland and to America, acquiring local characteristics while sharing the legacy of the English essay model. Readers in these new markets were already primed to see the periodical essay as *the* vehicle for the expression of civic values, of attacks on an overly commercial society, and of an almost comically pessimistic attitude to the possibilities of reforming their readers. The particular importance of the essay to the fledgling American republic of letters is especially illuminated by the foundation in wider periodical culture that Squibbs's book provides. Scholars of eighteenth-century writing, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, will be very grateful for Squibbs's close attention to and invigorating reinterpretation of one of the Enlightenment's defining genres.

Nikki Hessel
Victoria University of Wellington