

Call for Papers

The Politics and Polemics of Gender in Early American Theatre

September 29-30, 2016, University of Salzburg, Austria

This conference seeks to explore the role of gender in the formation of American theatrical culture in the late-18th and early-19th centuries. While the political public sphere was traditionally restricted to men, and excluded women from active participation, this gendered distinction was not so clear-cut in the literary realm. In fact, numerous women participated in the political debate through aesthetic venues of communication. The theatre in particular emerged as a space that proved remarkably liberal as it increasingly granted access and prestige to female voices and bodies. At times polemically, at times cautiously, many women have articulated their political opinions in plays—some of which were performed, others only published, many of them neither and lost.

The question of the relationship between gender and the theatre in early America, however, is not merely one of authorship, but also one of representation and aesthetic mediation. Importantly, early American theatre was a prominent venue for the articulation and negotiation of gender politics: Through dramatic texts and/or theatrical productions, early Americans could elaborate and debate gender roles and stereotypes, sexual and other desires, as well as the complex intersections of gender and race. Moreover, the theatre emerged as a vital space for disputes about the gendered nature of American liberalism, republicanism, nationhood, and more specifically the role of masculinity in a highly militarized culture.

The conference, eventually, also aims at linking gender to the question of theatrical production and reception: While early American theatre sought to appeal to the literate and illiterate alike, and did indeed reach broad (though by no means all) sections of the population, it was at the same time contained by a strongly gendered rhetoric of religious censorship. The highly visible status of the gendered body in performance turned the theatre into an exemplary space for the assertion of cultural anxieties related to (sexual) pleasure—and thus, provided a vocabulary of deviance that ranged from licentious players to enraptured audiences.

In line with the general theme of the conference, possible contributions could consider the politics and polemics of gender in the following areas of inquiry (but also in other areas not listed here):

- **Public Sphere:** In what ways did theatre constitute a public, or even a counterpublic sphere, and how is a theatrical public different from a print public? Who had access to theatrical publics and who did not? What kinds of public debate, argument, and polemic did the theatre enable? How is theatre related to propaganda efforts?
- **Nationalism/Patriotism:** How did the theatre contribute to the articulation of a specifically ‘American’ national consciousness or cultural imaginary? In what ways did the theatre dispute – and renounce – Britishness vis-à-vis the emerging nation?
- **Aesthetics:** How did early American theatre negotiate the influence of European, and particularly British, aesthetics? And how did theatrical aesthetics relate to its material production context (limited funds, traveling companies, religious censorship)?
- **Transnationalism/Transatlantic Exchange:** In what ways was early American theatre embedded in the transatlantic exchange of goods, money, ideas, and human

- beings? How did early American plays/playwrights/theatre companies travel abroad, and how did British plays/playwrights/theatre companies travel to America?
- **Performance Cultures:** What was the cultural and social status of actors and actresses, playwrights, or theatre managers? In what ways did gender affect the politics of early American stardom? What was the influence of all-male Masonic lodges on theatrical productions?
 - **Political Theory:** How did theatre impact on the construction of the modern national citizen-subject? In what ways were such diverse notions as egalitarianism, individualism, common sense, liberalism, or imperialism contemplated in early American theatre?
 - **Race and Ethnicity:** In what ways were African Americans or Native Americans represented on the stage? What kind of access did non-white populations have to the theatre? And how can scholars uncover and delve into archives of non-white, non-European performance cultures?
 - **Immigration:** In how far did theatre reflect the growing importance of immigration in American cultural history? Which immigrant nationalities featured in the plays and which kinds of representations were offered (development of national stock characters, processes of othering, etc.)?
 - **Queer theory:** What role did homosociality play in the nation-building process? In what ways did early dramatic texts represent male-male relations? In how far can these texts be read through a queer lens?
 - **Social class:** How did the theatre depict and/or enact class distinctions in what was nominally an egalitarian nation? In what ways did gender politics affect the performative construction of distinct classes with particular social habits?
 - **Authorship:** What was the role of female playwrights in early American society? How did individual authors negotiate their authorial status in their plays? How can we account for anonymous authorship?
 - **Reception:** How did different audiences react to different plays? What was the importance of local infrastructure to theatrical production? What was the public discourse about the theatre (financial, religious, aesthetic, nationalist, etc.), and who shaped it?
 - **Rhetoric:** In what ways were the plays infused by a gendered rhetoric? Were favored genres of dispute, above all the satire, openly polemical or clandestinely querulous?

Confirmed Keynote Speaker: Trish Loughran, University of Illinois, author of *The Republic in Print* (Columbia University Press)

Conference Organizers: Verena Holztrattner, Leopold Lippert, Ralph J. Poole, Michael Streif

Proposals for papers should include a title, abstract (300 words maximum) and a brief personal biography, sent as a single Word document to

leopold.lippert@sbg.ac.at by **January 11, 2016**.