

Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution. By EDWARD LARKIN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 215 pages. \$65.00 (cloth).

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Thomas Paine is something of the black sheep of the revolutionary founding family. Sure, academics write about Paine's political ideas, but he has not really figured in the popular revival of the revolutionary generation that is taking place in the United States. New biographies of figures such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington and popular histories of the Revolution seem to appear each year, yet Paine—whose pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776) was arguably the most important piece of writing in the period leading up to independence—is notably absent from the American revolutionary pantheon. This elision has less to do with Paine's radical politics and more to do with his lifelong itinerancy as well as the universal reach of his prose, which make it more difficult to repossess him as a national treasure. The claim at the outset of *Common Sense*, that “the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind,” might be read as the cornerstone of a national civil religion; alternatively, it may suggest abstract ideals that all but subsume national distinctions.

Edward Larkin's impressive study of Paine's literary achievement takes such moments of rhetorical complexity seriously. This book is really the first to assess Paine's place in eighteenth-century print culture by analyzing a broad range of his writings. Its inspiration likely comes from Robert Ferguson's observation that, though Paine scholars often acknowledge the popular appeal of his prose style, they traditionally attend more to the political content than the style of his writing. This lack of attention seems odd, since, as Ferguson notes, “Paine is the only figure in the pantheon of Revolutionary leaders who achieved his place entirely through authorship.”¹ With this kind of perspective in mind, Larkin offers historical context and careful rhetorical analysis of well-known writings such as *Common Sense*, *The Rights of Man* (1791), and *The Age of Reason* (1794–95), as well as the less canonical *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* (1782) and *The Letter to George Washington* (1796).

Larkin begins by considering the outset of Paine's literary career in America as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1775–76. Though Larkin emphasizes this early work's attempt to unify colonials by imagining American identity, his method nevertheless puts it in a transatlantic context by situating Paine within the historical development of eighteenth-century British and British-American magazines (with particular attention to Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*, founded in 1731). Paine thus emerges as an important figure in transatlantic print culture who significantly adapted the magazine genre's democratizing and unifying (Cave's motto for the magazine was “E Pluribus Unum” [27]) possibilities to an American audience increasingly hostile to imperial rule. Larkin would certainly agree with (and includes in his notes) Jack P. Greene's assertion that Paine helped to modernize politics by contributing to “the desacralization of the traditional political order.”² But rather than

¹ Studies that reconsider Thomas Paine in important and innovative ways nevertheless read him thematically rather than rhetorically. See, for example, Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York, 1997); Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). Robert Ferguson, “The Commonalities of *Common Sense*,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 57, no. 3 (July 2000): 465–504 (quotation, 469).

² Jack P. Greene, “Paine, America, and the ‘Modernization’ of Political Consciousness,” *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 74.

emphasizing, as Greene does, the radical character of American society that helped to change Paine, Larkin argues that Paine rhetorically “invented a public that he could then claim to represent in his writings” (24). Paine’s prose style was not simply accessible, as so many have noted, but was meant “to instill a sense of enfranchisement in a popular audience” (7).

Drawing on the language of postcolonial theory, Larkin argues for what he calls the hybrid quality of Paine’s prose: “Instead of subscribing to the traditional binary that counterpoised the mob and the elite, he created an idiom where politics could be simultaneously popular and thoroughly reasoned” (3–4). What is particularly intriguing about the emphasis on the hybrid conflation of social languages and cultural forms is that it accords with the most hostile criticism leveled at Paine by those who still upheld a hierarchical vision of society and politics, illustrated in the infamous 1804 letter in which John Adams angrily called Paine “a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf” (8).

Successive chapters proceed to discuss, among other matters, Paine’s critique of the early American public sphere, his historical account of the American Revolution, and the scientific methodology informing the language and argument of *The Age of Reason*. The most impressive features of this book are Larkin’s willingness to creatively reconceptualize genre and his ability to find important figurative and thematic relations within the Paine canon. On the first count, he argues that the *Letter to the Abbé Raynal* should be read as not only Paine’s history of the American Revolution but also Paine’s theory of historical writing in general. Writing with a European audience in mind, he rebuts Raynal’s skeptical account of the Revolution and goes on to theorize the rhetorical nature of all historical writing. “*The Letter to Raynal* is fundamentally not so much a work of history as a work of literary criticism” (104). On the second count, Larkin innovatively compares Paine’s mechanical interest in bridges and his sense that as political discourse *The Rights of Man* itself would unify European nations according to rational and enlightened principles: “Just as his model bridge would build connections and enhance communication between the various regions and states in the United States, his political bridge would lead to better relations between Europe’s traditional enemies” (132).

The most difficult conceptual issue that this study engages, and that sometimes leaves it hamstrung, concerns the relation of political writing to public and private space. Larkin’s theoretical premises about the nature of print and the public sphere rely heavily on Michael Warner’s *The Letters of the Republic* and Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.³ While acknowledging that the public sphere was not a historical reality or even a fixed ideology, Larkin accords it significant cultural weight as he considers throughout Paine’s relation to the public sphere. He argues that Paine self-consciously tried to revise this construct from a democratic-egalitarian position; that is, Paine opposed the impersonality of authorship or the strict separation of ideas from individual authors because he saw it as a means to perpetuate elitist assumptions about society and authorship itself. His argument leads to the recurring conclusion that Paine’s relation to republican print culture was contradictory or paradoxical. But what emerges from Larkin’s insightful analysis of eighteenth-century print wars—Paine’s exchanges with loyalists who wrote pamphlets

³ Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

attacking *Common Sense*, or his literary contribution to the Silas Deane affair—is the hopelessly fluid and messy relation of public and private spheres.

This fluidity would seem to be the inevitable result of complex historical realities and the very nature of polemical writing in which Paine was engaged. Larkin is meticulous in tracing Paine's inconsistencies, but he tends to euphemize them, noting, for example, his "often ambiguous and even incoherent" (12) relationship to the public sphere or "the ad hoc nature of his approach to public debate" (101). The evidence Larkin offers really portrays a master polemicist who was so effective, and so hated by many, because of his willingness to alter the rhetorical rules of engagement in ways that suited his immediate strategy. Paine could be ruthlessly inconsistent if he thought it served a larger cause in which he believed: he wrote against slavery in 1774, for example, yet the next year warned Americans about the specter of "savages and Negroes" helping the Hessians burn American towns. *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution* shows the highly unstable norms for print culture and authorship in the late eighteenth century.

This fine book ends by considering the politics of Paine's legacy in the nineteenth century as well as the creative influence his thinking had on literary luminaries such as Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. In surveying the volatile genre of nineteenth-century Paine biography, Larkin sorts out and makes sense of the array of personal and political motivations that shaped the genre after Paine's death in 1809. Like so many others, Larkin notes that James Cheetham's biography was nothing more than a hatchet job, but he also includes lesser-known biographies as a way of tracing divergent yet overlapping genealogies of myths and misconceptions about Paine that exist even to this day. He shows, for example, that the British government sponsored George Chalmers's *The Life of Thomas Paine* to discredit Paine's radical ideas. Such a consideration of Paine's legacy enables the book to come full circle to its initial premise: Paine's literary reputation has been occluded by personal animosities, political and ideological divides, or overall concerns for his ideas rather than his rhetorical acumen. This move, however, may inspire future scholarly work on the historical and cultural politics of Paine studies. Such inquiry might include consideration of where and why Paine's writings were republished during the nineteenth century. Paine's *Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank, and Paper-Money* (1786), for example, was republished in 1838 soon after the controversy surrounding the rechartering of the National Bank. Or it might even extend into the modern and contemporary era. Larkin's concluding insights about the shifting political demands affecting Paine biography begins to suggest new ways to think about the political assumptions underlying modern literary scholarship about Paine. It is no coincidence that, during the Second World War, Harry Hayden Clark began his introduction to his anthology of Paine's writings with the observation: "At a time when the forward-looking peoples of the world are engaged in the mighty task of preserving and enlarging the rights of the Common Man, the ideas of Thomas Paine, the most articulate spokesman of those rights, ought to be better known."⁴

⁴ George Chalmers, *The Life of Thomas Paine, the Author of Rights of Man, with a Defense of his Writings* (London, 1791); [Thomas Paine], *Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank, and Paper-Money* (Philadelphia, [1786]); Harry Hayden Clark, ed., *Thomas Paine: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes* (New York, 1944), v.