

PERFORMING THE TEMPLE OF LIBERTY: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850. By Jenna M. Gibbs. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2014.

Jenna M. Gibbs's *Performing the Temple of Liberty* is a carefully researched and clearly written study of the role theatrical and other popular performances of race played in debates over slavery and individual rights in London and Philadelphia from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. With reference to a deep archive and a wealth of secondary sources (helpfully cataloged in an appended "Essay on Sources"), Gibbs spins a convincing transatlantic and intertextual account of the inherently political work of the theatre in an era that saw the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery itself in the British empire and the United States. Gibbs joins a growing number of cultural historians and literary critics who argue that the theatre in this period did not hold a mirror up to the debates over chattel slavery and racial equality so much as it staged those debates, marshaled political constituencies, and shaped the popular understanding of race in enduring ways.

*Performing the Temple of Liberty* is divided into three sections centered on three periods (1760s–1810s, 1820s–1830s, and 1830s–1840s) and on three sets of interrelated cultural figures: Britannia, Columbia, the Temple of Liberty, and the African supplicant; the blackface minstrel and transatlantic travels; and the blackface minstrel and the revolutionary hero. Within this structure, Gibbs treats a wide range of dramatic productions—from Isaac Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock* (1768), to mid-nineteenth-century adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—and associated genres, including (among others) pageantry, popular song, oratory, scientific treatises, etchings, cartoons, broadsides, and reviews. The combination of these established what Gibbs describes as an evolving, ideologically elastic "lexicon of recognizable meanings and symbols" (5) for debates over slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. That the lexicon was grounded in Enlightenment-era neoclassical images but also increasingly influenced by the essentialist discourses of racial science and the racial burlesque contributes to what I believe is Gibbs's most important contribution: an explanation of why anti-slavery reformers so often drew upon minstrelsy as a representational resource. In Gibbs's account, minstrelsy and radical visions of individual liberty both took root in the lexicon developed through a British-American dialogue concerning slavery. This is why, she concludes, "radical and reformist sentiments had become inextricable from racialist satire by the mid-nineteenth century" (250).

The weaknesses of the book are minor. First, there is some distracting repetition. The introduction provides a summary of each section, each section begins with a brief overview, and some chapters conclude with summary, such that the reiteration of claims occasionally blunts the force of the narrative. Second, the book occasionally misfires in its close analysis of visual and dramatic texts and glossing of literary history. But these are minor complaints about a work of impressive scope and profound insights. *Performing the Temple of Liberty* is essential reading for scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglophone drama. In the company of recent books by Peter P. Reed, Heather S. Nathans, Douglas A. Jones Jr., and Elizabeth Maddox Dillon, Gibbs's work enriches our understanding of the relationship between theatrical performances of race and liberty and the political and social movements that led to the demise of slavery but not the underpinning racial logic.

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