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Nine Plays of Early America, 1765-1818
Edited by Sarah E. Chinn and Richard S. Pressman
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467 pp.

A little over twenty years ago, Jeffrey H. Richards's collection *Early American Drama* (1997) changed my life. I was a graduate student falling in love with the prose and poetry of the early United States but keenly aware that my commitment to beautiful language had been forged in reading and performing drama. By carefully editing for a general audience such works as Robert Montgomery Bird's *The Gladiator* and Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion*, Richards showed me and so many others that there were indeed historical and aesthetic pleasures to be found in American drama prior to the Civil War.

With *Nine Plays of Early America, 1765-1818*, Sarah E. Chinn and Richard S. Pressman offer us a new volume in the ongoing effort to recover a slighted body of work, focusing on plays from a period when, in the words of the introduction, "contemporary military, political, and social debates followed American audiences into the theater" (16). In the introduction, Chinn acknowledges the impact of Richards's anthology, as well as Amelia Howe Kritzer's *Plays of Early American Women* (1995), even as she makes room for their offering. Though *Nine Plays* includes Royall Tyler's ubiquitous *The Contrast*, it primarily offers works unfamiliar to most Americanists: Robert Rogers's *Ponteach* (1763), a surprisingly sympathetic portrait of Pontiac and the Ottawa people's resistance to British forces; *The Fall of British Tyranny* (1776), a bellicose review of the war's highlights, purportedly by John Leacock; Robert Munford's measured *The Patriots* (1777), which was not publicly performed; Susanna Haswell Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), focused on women held in captivity by Barbary corsairs; William Dunlap's *André* (1798), a tragic portrait of the controversial wartime execution of British officer John André, and Dunlap's far more successful re-write, *The Glory of Columbia: Her Yeomanry!* (1803); Mary Carr's portrait of conflict around Lake Erie during the War of 1812 in *The Fair Americans* (1815); and John Howard Payne's *Brutus; or, The Fall of Tarquin* (1818), a Roman tragedy outlining heroic, disinterested leadership. Each of these works receives a one-paragraph headnote by Chinn and ample footnoting by Pressman.

The volume begins with Chinn's concise, heavy-hitting introduction, derived in part from her first-rate study *Spectacular Men: Race, Gender, and Nation on the Early American Stage* (Oxford University Press 2017). She emphasizes the didacticism and the accessibility of the early stage, reminding us that among the working class, especially in the mid-Atlantic and southern states, illiteracy and lack of money for printed texts meant the theater was far more influential than the novel. Further, she emphasizes that "the theater was the realm of working white men" (8) whose political influence was ascendant in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Because the drama sought to inculcate moral virtue and also reflected on contemporary events, it is not surprising that it became subject to the intense partisanship of the early nineteenth century. Overall, Chinn's introduction gives the general reader a powerful sense of the drama's palpable political work. It also provides a helpful bibliography of relevant scholarship, including works of theatrical history by Richards, Christopher Bigsby and Don Wilmeth, Heather Nathans, Matthew

Rebhorn, David Grimsted, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon. (I only wish the list included Jason Shaffer's excellent *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in Colonial and Revolutionary Theater* [2007].)

There is much to recommend *Nine Plays* for the classroom, not the least of which are the headnotes and footnotes assisting the reader with references to unfamiliar events and personages. It is a sturdy and easily navigable volume, with clean typeface and layout. Punctuation in each play is modernized, but original spelling has been largely retained to “maintain[] a strong sense of the original” (3). *Nine Plays* is the fifth of six works published so far by Pressman's Early American Reprints, which aims to provide highly affordable, quality teaching texts for the college classroom; the non-profit venture, in Pressman's own words, is “a labor of love.”

My hope is that *Nine Plays* inspires in a new set of readers a love for dramatic writing from a critical period in the development of national politics and cultural identity. By reading these plays, we gain access to a popular theater that, as Chinn emphasizes, influenced the role of laboring white men in the early Republic—and also, I would add, drew upon (though in often exploitative and inaccurate ways) the experiences that gave the lie to the Revolutionary project, especially those of Native Americans and enslaved Africans. If teachers and students will but take it up, *Nine Plays* will fuel new teaching and scholarship attentive to the drama's complicated preservation of embodied experience from the margins as well as from the playhouse of early America.