

Oliver Scheiding

"Brevity and Liminality in Early American Literary Magazines"

The majority of short narratives that attracted the readership in the early years of the American republic were sensationalistic. Weekly and monthly literary magazines were filled with original and selected "small tales" characterized by things extraordinary elevated to the amazing, the curious blown up to the marvelous. An anonymous letter addressed to the editor of *The Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register* (1800-1804) revealed the profusion of liminal fantasies in the pages of early American literary magazines. The author complained that literary magazines "prefer such tales as abound with stories of demons, hobgoblins, specters, witches, haunted towers, church-yards, charnel houses, tombs, enchantments, murders, robberies, gods, goddesses, angels, divinities, demigods, heroes, heroines, lovers, &c. - or lovers, gallantries, intrigues, bastards, perjuries, murder, assassination, hair-breadth-escapes, suicides, and an almost infinite chain of ridiculous and wild et ceteras" (1802, 261). Magazine's editors quickly learned to exploit their readers' appetite for transgressive short narratives. They obtained factual and fictional stories from all sources available to satisfy a growing taste for sensationalistic topics about outsiders, shape-shifters, and marginal characters. While periodical studies discuss early literary magazines as "virtual coffeehouses" (cf. Gardner 2012), an ideal literary space to negotiate a republican order among readers and writers alike, my paper reassesses eighteenth-century literary magazines as a space that embellishes the abnormal, eccentric, weird, and incredible in order to build a periodical business upon liminal fantasies that could be freely tapped by the readers.

In the "rational age" of the early republic (1780-1830), abnormality was inherently interesting. Human nature was imagined as running wild in foreign settings, but there were many exceptions, and as magazine fiction shows (even prior to Poe), the domestic and foreign are telescoped together in stories about liminal figures, such as the criminal Thomas Bell, who is considered the forerunner of the confidence man in nineteenth-century American literature. In this context, liminality relates to periods of social transition, when "subjects pass through a

period of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo" (Turner 1982, 24). These processes are frequently described in terms of "spatial symbolism" understood as a movement or transference from one place to another, usually crossing a "threshold which separates two distinct areas" (25). Literary magazines teem with stories about mobility that comes from liminality and fellow human beings in liminal states, in between the accepted social structure. Not unlike later nineteenth-century short stories (Hawthorne's tales, for instance), these early liminal texts reveal the complex nature of human reality often at odds with social reality.

From the point of view of periodical studies, my paper intends to discuss the relationship between brevity and liminality evident in the pages of early American magazines. It will focus on the emergence of the liminal character story, and will explore this development in the context of the periodical business of the time.