

“To what complexion are we come at last?”

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# Performing the Temple of Liberty

Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture  
in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850



JENNA M. GIBBS

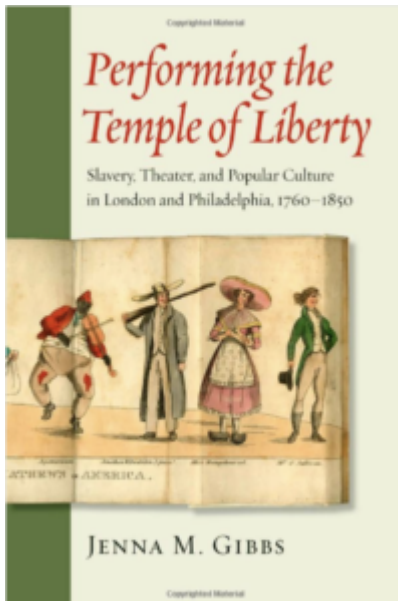
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Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760-1850*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 328 pp., \$55.

Jenna Gibbs's *Performing the Temple of Liberty* begins with a fanciful invitation to the reader to accompany her on a "stroll along the Thames River," past the scene of slaves being led to ships that will transport them for sale overseas, towards taverns and coffeehouses where Londoners might have been discussing the Haymarket Theatre's current production of Colman's *Inkle and Yarico*. She juxtaposes these two images—shackled black bodies *en route* to the Americas with a play featuring white bodies in blackface debating the moral evils of slavery—to offer a point of entry into her larger subject: a comparative study of performance culture and abolitionism in London and Philadelphia during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century.

Over the past twenty years, theater scholars have argued for the importance of performance culture in shaping political thought in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world. For example, Jeffrey H. Richards's 1991 study, *Theatre Enough*, explores the metaphor of politics in America's revolutionary ideology. Additionally, scholars such as Peter Reed, Daphne Brooks, Gay Gibson Cima, Lisa Merrill, Douglas Jones, John Frick, Amy Hughes, Marvin McAllister, W.T. Lhamon Jr., Tracy Davis, Sandra Gustafson, Sarah Meer, and Shane White (among others) have paid careful attention to the ways in which transatlantic performance culture engaged with issues of race, and particularly questions of liberty and slavery.

Gibbs's seven-chapter study (divided into three parts with an introduction and a conclusion) shifts back and forth between London and Philadelphia as two poles of antislavery activity in the Atlantic world. In chapters one, two, and three, she explores the origins of what she labels "oral blackface," or a "new genre of racial ridicule, with [a] free exchange between theatrical, print, visual, and civic culture" (49). She examines the ways in which the dialogue of popular blackface characters such as Mungo (from Charles Dibdin's popular play *The Padlock*) infiltrated rhetorical and visual practices beyond the playhouse—whether in political cartoons or even costumes worn to fancy-dress balls (65). She suggests that even as Mungo and some of his counterparts (like Harlequin Negro) were adopted by antislavery activists, they also provided fodder for those who opposed abolition by offering infantilized or clownish representations of black characters. As Gibbs, Brooks, Reed, Nathans, and others have noted, depictions of African or African American characters were often co-opted by groups with diametrically opposed goals and invoked to demonstrate that slavery was inherently evil *or* that it protected those too simple to fend for themselves.



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This paradox of representation lay at the heart of much antislavery performance culture in the Atlantic world. Communities of activists on both sides of the Atlantic sought a resolution to this seemingly inescapable contradiction by building grandiose visions of a return to Africa as a solution for British and American slavery and the repatriation of stolen African peoples, as well as a natural site for both territorial and evangelical expansion. In chapter three, Gibbs mentions William Dunlap's adaptation of George Colman's *The Africans, or War, Love, and Duty* as an example of a transatlantic drama that draws on a wider lexicon of sermons, histories, and other representations of Africa circulating in British culture. And while Colman and Dunlap (who was a secretary of New York's Manumission Society) both championed the antislavery cause, Gibbs argues that each did so while both implicitly and explicitly "trumpeting white cultural superiority" (101).

Chapters four and five examine the rapid increase and expansion in the performance of urban blackface—connected to the proliferation of print and theatrical circulation in the wake of the War of 1812. Urbanization and early industrialization in the U.S. widened the racial spectacle(s) on display for British theater-goers in America, as they encountered new incarnations of familiar black characters. As Gibbs notes, "The urban picaresque and proto-variety vaudeville genres were ... used to critique slavery even as their characters disparaged black freedom" (117). As theater scholars Nathans, Frick, Hughes, Meer, Jones, and Merrill have noted, part of the challenge of publicly critiquing African slavery onstage was that both British and American audiences had a long history of violent protest against unpopular ideas—protests that periodically resulted in the destruction of performance spaces or even bodily

harm to the actors and orchestra members. Thus even the most passionately abolitionist managers, performers, and playwrights often framed their messages in more palatable or unthreatening forms.

And while black characters continued to be played by white actors in blackface (and often *British* actors in blackface, most notably in the case of Charles Mathews, which Gibbs discusses in chapter five), more and more United States-inflected representations of African American characters were emerging in the Atlantic circuit. As United States-based characters began to populate the theatrical, visual, and literary landscape, they underscored the “British critique of American democracy,”—a theme Britons had invoked since the Revolutionary War when Americans tried to justify their own battle for liberty alongside the continuation of chattel slavery (176).

Chapter six/part three begins with a fascinating consideration of how British cosmopolitanism combined with the “full-blown scientific racism embedded in the mockery of black slavery” to highlight “a dialogue between the burlesque and the utopian” (178). Gibbs argues that far from existing as inherent opposites, “blackface minstrelsy and revolutionary utopianism did not merely take the stage side by side; rather blackface minstrels became *part* of the performance of revolutionary utopianism” (179). The turmoil of the 1830s spawned a number of “coded figure[s] of contested meanings” on London and Philadelphia stages, from the heroic Spartacus to the clownish Jim Crow (205). For Gibbs, as for other scholars of theater history, the slave revolts of the 1830s offer a pivotal moment to reexamine the relationship between the representation of slavery and blackness in white Atlantic culture, as well as a renewed investigation of black agency. For example, Gibbs analyzes Robert Montgomery Bird’s familiar 1831 play, *The Gladiator* (a tragedy that the author acknowledged offered a natural association with the Nat Turner uprising), and considers it alongside Bird’s lesser-known novel *Sheppard Lee* (1836), which also traces the history of an uprising—this time one set in the South, rather than ancient Thrace and Rome. The juxtaposition underscores the ways in which Bird tempered his message to suit the medium of performance (as well as the personality of star actor Edwin Forrest, for whom the play was written).

Chapter seven and the conclusion examine the consequences of decades of building “radical agitation and sociopolitical unrest” (212). In this chapter, Gibbs pays particular attention to George Dibdin Pitt’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture, or The Black Spartacus* and novelist George Lippard’s *Washington and his Generals; or, Legends of the Revolution*. Both call for a “radical and racially inclusive social and economic regeneration” through the black heroes in their works (214). Including Lippard in this chapter is a particularly intriguing choice given his reputation for writing works that hit close to home among his fellow Philadelphians. The theatrical adaptation of his *Monks of Monk Hall* was reportedly so scathing and scandalous that it had to be pulled from the stage before its opening. As Gibbs notes, both Pitt’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture* and Lippard’s *Washington and his Generals* address the challenge of the growing white underclass (a theme scholar Peter Reed has explored as well). Gibbs also

probes British audiences' interest in the American-born black performer Ira Aldridge. Britons appreciated the ways in which Aldridge combined familiar tropes of minstrel performance with antislavery themes (224). As theater scholar Bernth Lindfors has observed, it was not until Aldridge "escaped" the Atlantic circuit and began performing elsewhere in Europe (most notably Prussia and Austria) that he began to be known as a classical actor.

In her conclusion Gibbs turns (perhaps not surprisingly) to the work that galvanized and transformed the performance of race and slavery in the Atlantic world: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's controversial novel was rapidly adapted for the stage in a bewildering array of genres, from the minstrel burlesque to tragedy, and produced a proliferation of images, pamphlets, and objects (such as china figurines of Uncle Tom and Little Eva) for audience consumption on both sides of the Atlantic. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrated the inability of Atlantic performance culture to contain or control images of blackness or slavery, a point further underscored by Gibbs's astute use of the image "Our Goddess of Liberty" (1870), representing a range of female faces, including white, Irish, African, and Native American, and punctuated with the query, "What is she to be? To what complexion are we come at last?" (250). This image offers a nice counterpoint to Gibbs's invocation of the various "goddesses of liberty" or "Spirits of Columbia" that she cites throughout the text, tracing their trajectory alongside the young nation's discourse on race relations and the role of whites in uplifting enslaved African populations.

As a minor note, the study is peppered with some factual errors related to dates of performance, as well as occasional chronological confusion among the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources that Gibbs cites. Nevertheless, this is a well-written and comprehensive work that should help scholars of British and American history imagine how they might integrate an understanding of performance culture into an examination of race and slavery in the pre-Revolutionary and antebellum periods.

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