



***Review of Poetry Wars: Verse and Politics
in the American Revolution and Early
Republic***

By Colin Wells. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia,
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Within the first twenty pages of *Poetry Wars: Verse and Politics in the American Revolution and Early Republic*, Colin Wells makes a bold and far-reaching claim. He asserts that the aim of his text is to demonstrate the importance of political poetry as it is woven throughout the story of the American Revolution and the consequent construction of the federal government and initial party systems. Though studies of America's conception and the Revolutionary War are ubiquitous, *Poetry Wars* undertakes the unique task of organizing the “dynamic story of how political identities were formed amid shifting rhetorical strategies in response to rival arguments and unfolding events” (18). Though the poetic form is too often ignored, Wells argues for the rhetorical importance of poetry which was widely circulated throughout the print public sphere of the late eighteenth century. While taking on a monumental task in addressing a rather vast and substantial historical window, Wells does excellent work not only in his primary claim, but also in revealing a space where women and minorities were given room to speak within a cultural creation dominated by a primarily white patriarchy.

After establishing the rich context for a particularly thriving print public sphere shaped between 1765-1815 and introducing the distinct opportunity for intersection amid “poetic form and political discourse,” Wells begins his text with a focus on prerevolutionary poets (colonial) and proclamations (British) in his chapter “The Poetics of Resistance”. Addressing printed material as early as the 1720's, the bulk of

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Wells's analysis within this section is grounded in the early 1770's, illustrating how colonial American writers responded to the Coercive/Intolerable Acts of British Parliament. Through carefully chosen verses juxtaposed to the formal documents they were satirizing, and followed by the direct historical outcomes, Wells effectively highlights the power poetry had to sway the public to either act directly or alter their ideological standing. Each of the subsequent chapters is structured through a similar scaffolding in which Wells sets up the historical context and the immediate political climate, and then shifts to specific poetic case or cases which challenged the political documents and collective ideology within that particular phase of revolutionary history; he concludes each section with a quick overview of the outcomes ensued as a result of his aptly termed "poetic warfare".

Following the extensive development of poetic resistance, Wells shifts to a more specified argument in "War and Literary War," unpacking the literary "warfare" waged between Loyalists and Patriots through song, mimicry, and the culmination of John Trumbull's mock epic *M'Fingal*. This section concludes with a withdraw of Loyalist publications from the printed public sphere, thus shifting to a more private realm. Through this monumental change, comes "Poetry and Conspiracy" which continues through the remainder of the war and into the defining of political parties and efforts to outline democracy within a new republic. Chapters four and six, "The Language of Liberty" and "Mirror Images" explore similar yarns surrounding the French Revolution and the possibility of a pattern of continued political movements following the example of America's successful rebellion and established democracy. However, these points of intersection and hope of echoing revolutionary success became problematic with the continued violence and moral complexities developing throughout the French Revolution; American poets struggled to contend with clear portrayals of their French counterpart. Within the section entitled "The Voice of the People," Wells illustrates many early American poets' initial hesitancy in critiquing members of the new federal administration; however, such risks were ultimately taken to expose John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and others thought to be working against the ideologies of a new republic. Through the concluding chapter, "The Triumph of Democracy," Wells examines the struggles between Republican and Federalists ideology through their poetry, and the meaning of Jefferson's presidency, and the end of the first party system, all of which were battled through poetic means.

Undoubtedly, the success of *Poetry Wars* as a scholarly endeavor is that it exemplifies the real power poetry held in altering American Revolutionary history, not just as a medium to relay events or communicate belief(s), but as a functioning tool in altering historical precedence. Political poetry successfully functioned to neutralize

power, and to adversely create a “sphere of public authority” in which public opinion crafted real change. Though Wells does not shape his text through feminist theory or claim feminist readings as a dominate scholastic advancement, his threads on female narratives including analysis of “The Female Patriots” and “Daughters of Liberty in America” speaks boldly to prior readings of women’s roles within this historical moment and their voices and understanding of self within this male centered era. Similarly, Wells opens up a space for discussion of the role of differing ethnicities and cultural nuances played in shaping an early America, especially in regard to the policy and politics of Native American treatment, and how Native peoples are addressed through poetic rendition. Both gender and race are touched on tentatively, but advantageously within this work as well as clear success in solidifying the power of poetry in early American politics.

Because this text undertakes such a layered and complex historical moment, some of the historical digressions and anecdotes are dense with allusions and antiquated detail, making the content rich for historical scholars. There are times too, when literary allusions, theory, and terminology pervade as a means to unpack the carefully chosen verses used for illustration throughout; making this work an engaging and informative read for literary scholars, also. The political poems selected for the center of this publication, however, are not printed in their entirety, but only named by author, title, and accompanied by a few highly selected lines appearing to facilitate the argument; one seeking to use this work as an instructional piece on poetry and/or poetic theory will need to locate the full poetic selections outside this publication for they are not provided.

Poetry Wars is a multifaceted work that speaks across scholarly boundaries to effectively reveal a rhetorical and artistic authority overlooked by American scholars across genres. It is well written and thoughtful. And though Wells envisions his work as speaking directly to literary and historical studies, his text is additionally an exemplar publication for rhetorical examination, and a starting point for further gender and race study within the early American imaginary. Those who wish to engage with some of the earliest written advancements posited towards American nation making and the national narrative will find several points of departure within this multidimensional composition; it speaks directly to Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, the power of print culture, and the complexities of literature to shape action, an excellent read for anyone interested in the complexities of early America.

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About the Author

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