

*The Portrait and the Book: Illustration and Literary Culture in Early America.* By MEGAN WALSH. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. 270 pages. Paper, ebook.

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In *The Portrait and the Book*, Megan Walsh argues that “the influence of book illustration on American literary culture begins . . . not with the widespread publication in the United States of American-authored illustrated books in the nineteenth century . . . but instead decades earlier” (5). According to Walsh, “imported illustrated books” (5)—defined here as books with even one illustration, often a portrait frontispiece—shaped not only the kinds of images included in American books but also the meanings readers made of images and their accompanying texts. By “recover[ing] the story of the illustrated book in America during the second half of the eighteenth century” (19), Walsh evokes not just a literary world full of visual cues but one in which authors and printers deployed images, especially portraits, to both reflect and shape approaches to literary texts including autobiographies, poetry, and novels.

In five topical chapters, Walsh examines the creation and uses of portraits in works from a range of genres. She begins with Benjamin Franklin, well-known (as Walsh notes) as a printer and author of texts but interpreted here as a savvy producer and interpreter of images. Walsh reads the various Franklin portraits that served as frontispieces to his *Autobiography*, first published in 1791, with and against Franklin’s verbal self-depictions. Working closely with Franklin’s descriptions of his appearance at various moments, she argues that his textual self-fashioning deliberately tipped off his readers to the ways in which these portraits were also constructions that concealed as much about his identity as they revealed. Depictions as a rustic in a fur cap, for instance, belied Franklin’s fame as a statesman.

Walsh next turns to Phillis Wheatley and the role that her frontispiece portrait played in constructing both her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) for the market and Wheatley herself as an “artifact” (101). Her publisher insisted on including Wheatley’s image in the first edition of *Poems* because “frontispiece portraits signified that a book had been written by a major author, and that fact would increase sales” (68). Because images were expensive to produce, only the works of an established author could support their inclusion, and so the image frontispiece both announced and buttressed Wheatley’s reputation. Walsh’s close examination of the frontispiece shows that the image “highlighted her [Wheatley’s] unusual social position by modifying the portrait conventions popular in the time and place in which she lived” (79). By depicting Wheatley fully dressed

and with her head covered, the frontispiece departed both from portraits of white women authors, who were more often depicted bareheaded, and from images that sexualized black women. Inclusion of a tea table, a common element of elite portraiture, linked Wheatley to white contemporaries but also suggested that the poet, like the table, was “a valuable luxury in the Wheatley family home” (79). If this image “was part of an attempt to stage her as a curiosity, ready for inspection by interested readers” (102), however, that attempt was contested by the poet herself; Wheatley’s poems “demonstrated her resistance to the ways whites wanted to manage her authorial identity through her picture” (20). Manipulation of Wheatley’s image, Walsh shows, continued beyond the poet’s life. Wheatley’s portrait became “an icon of the abolitionist movement” (98); at the same time, caricatures of the poet became a staple of anti-abolitionist broadsides. Her image was thus available for a range of uses that, Walsh argues, would have shaped readers’ approaches to her poems.

After the American Revolution, Walsh further argues, depictions of national and political figures became as important as author portraits, both in illustrated books and in periodicals and ephemera. “For readers of . . . magazines,” Walsh writes, “the republic of letters was also very much a republic of pictures” (129); and although images of all kinds were increasingly important, portraits remained the most reprinted genre. Published and republished in magazines and cheap ephemera, portraits of national political figures, Walsh shows, contributed to the growth of a national culture. Moreover, portraits combined with other physical aspects of American imprints to distinguish American-produced volumes from imports. Although books published in different American places had different material characteristics, “nearly all were visually less sophisticated than foreign books” (105). As a result, readers came “to think of American illustrated books as a bounded group” (105). American books might have been of lower quality than imports, but because they were materially distinct, their physicality combined with their nationalistic subject matter to help build a sense of national identity after 1790.

Though portraits of national political figures printed in cheap American editions sometimes bore little resemblance to the originals, verisimilitude was even less the goal for the genre Walsh turns to next. Seduction novels were “without question the most popular genre of fiction in the United States” (141). Both the texts and their illustrations were revised for American audiences, and in a set of close readings Walsh shows that the illustrations produced for U.S. editions mirrored the revised messages of the novels. American editions of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), for instance, jettisoned the novel’s original epistolary format. They also tended to include frontispiece portraits of the title character showing her “outsized, alone, and out of doors” (154), in contrast to the first British

edition's depiction of Pamela seated in a parlor reading with her would-be seducer. Thus both image and text refocused the reader's attention on Pamela as a woman rather than as a writer, making her accessible "as a figure designed for emulation by girls and young women" (156). Walsh further argues that images of seduction-novel heroines taught readers "lessons about civic virtue" (169); only those women whose stories ended with a successful marriage to an appropriate man earned visual representation. By emphasizing heroines' feminine dress and features, illustrations in these novels "conveyed the ideas of sentimentality, virtue, and gendered identity" (169) for readers to imitate.

Seduction fiction remained popular, but portraiture, Walsh asserts, came to be regarded with suspicion. Walsh devotes her last chapter to a literary analysis of Charles Brockden Brown's novels *Wieland* (1798) and *Ormond* (1799), reading the novels as critiques of American image culture. She examines not printed images but those described, produced, or encountered by characters in these novels. Brown, she writes, "argues that portraits are at best unnecessary to the United States and, at worst, deeply dangerous to civic order and national virtue" (174). Less trustworthy than words, portraits could be deliberately misused by bad actors seeking to deceive; they could also, perhaps more alarmingly, be overvalued into "empty fetish objects" (174), distracting even sincere and honest people from the more reliable truths available in narrative. If portraiture first helped define the nation, by the end of the eighteenth century it threatened to unmake it. Only by careful study and cautious consumption of visual artifacts, Brown's heroines caution, could Americans learn to read images properly.

Both historians and literary scholars will appreciate Walsh's fresh readings of well-known texts and the clarity of her prose. This is very much a literary scholar's analysis, and historians may wonder about the broader implications of her arguments. To what extent, for example, did readers adopt for themselves the virtues suggested by seduction-heroine frontispieces or the skepticism that Walsh finds in Brown's novels? How much was skepticism of portraits linked to class and race, and to what extent was it shaped by an increasingly contentious politics? How did images function for Americans with limited or no literacy skills? Scholars of visual culture as well as book historians may also want to build on this analysis both by reconsidering what Walsh's study of the eighteenth century suggests for our understanding of illustration in the nineteenth and by thinking further about the ways visual representation—especially of race and gender—may have shaped ideas about national identity or evoked different reactions in different regions. Though important debates about the role of print in shaping national identity remain open, this work suggests that historians might benefit from more closely considering illustrations along with words

in those conversations. Walsh's insistence on taking imported books and American ephemera seriously alongside American-authored books and her recovery of such a wealth of pre-1800 visual material adds to our understanding not just of what but also of how Americans read in the second half of the eighteenth century.