Winter 2010

# Review of Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America by Elisa Tamarkin

Ann Ostendorf
*Gonzaga University*, ostendorf@gonzaga.edu

A Review of

## *ANGLOPHILIA: DEFERENCE, DEVOTION, AND ANTEBELLUM AMERICA*

Elisa Tamarkin, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

by Ann Ostendorf, Marquette University

In *Anglophilia*, Elisa Tamarkin unpacks the ways American love of England intimately shaped its emerging national culture, in both conscious and subconscious ways. She also reads American anglophilia as one component of a shared American identity that transcended race and gender, if not class and region. In her own words, "*Anglophilia* is about paying respects to the symbolic value of England."[1] She proves this through a deep and creative reading of sources that include paintings, novels, national histories, travel narratives, newspapers and the ever-revelatory gossip columns. According to Tamarkin, this English-love ran much deeper than a mere continuation of the colonial inferiority complex. Rather, anglophilia emerged in American culture in seemingly contradictory ways; a republican democracy's high regard for deference and monarchy, a memory of the American Revolution as a particular site of English gentility, the anglo-saxonism of African-American abolitionists in England, and the Anglo academic culture of sociability among Harvard students.

As an example of the first, she uses the spectacular reception of the Prince of Wales in the United States in 1860 and the accompanying mania to know what he had for breakfast, how many times he sneezed, or the shape of his eyeglasses, as uniting the nation together in a display of deference toward monarchy. Yet, according to the author, this obsession was more than just part of the culture of celebrity along the lines of the American reception of Jenny Lind or the Marquis de Lafayette. Tamarkin interprets this infatuation with and deference to royalty, or "Monarch-Love," the title of chapter one, as a peculiarly American attempt to epitomize Englishness. Through her readings of novels and paintings about the American Revolution from the decades following it, Tamarkin finds Americans remembering their movement for independence as a series of shared English and American tea parties, banquets, love-affairs, and other niceties, in an attempt not to defeat, but to partake of the civilities of the opposition. Interestingly, in chapter three, the author finds that black American abolitionists also were interested in making themselves Englishmen. This desire originated beyond their high regard for what they considered the more advanced English concept of racial justice. Black abolitionists, she suggests, admired the English for their rejection of racist ideologies on the ground of this being "bad form."[2] Yet, they also explored their own cultural birthright as the heirs to the fruits of this more advanced slavery-free civilization. According to Tamarkin, black abolitionists did not consider the English superior to the Americans because they had ended slavery, but that they had ended slavery because they were a superior people. Similarly, in her final chapter, she describes an increasingly social university culture with "pretensions toward Britain," as desirous in America not because this was a more successful academic environment, but because it was a

**1** Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xxiii.

**2** *Ibid.*, 203.

more British academic environment.[3]

Tamarkin's grasp and use of theory throughout her inquiry is stunning, but this does not make for easy reading for the historian looking for conclusions about the nature of antebellum American culture. These insights are not lacking; rather they are submerged. This is not a critique of her perceptive conclusions, extensive range of primary source material, or scholarship in general, but a matter of its presentation. Because of how deeply she delves into every bit of evidence presented, the reader can get lost in the minutiae of analysis and become bogged down in the theoretically inclined secondary literature and contexts in which she places her ideas. By mentioning the name of a tangentially related scholar on most pages, the text becomes difficult to traverse. Her readers may have been better served by removing more of this to the footnotes, so her own reading and analysis could flow more consistently through the book. The theoretical complexity of this work makes it inadvisable for an undergraduate audience. Despite this small criticism, her playful language and unexpected analogies make for humorous interludes, and the illuminating insights she provides into early American and antebellum anglophilia are useful for a fuller understanding of the era.

This study could also have benefited from being placed more firmly in the context of the many historiographical debates her conclusions hint at. For example, her explanation for the dichotomy within American culture of, simultaneous to anglophilia, calls for a uniquely American cultural, would be interesting to hear. This work also seems to implicitly engage in the debate over the nature of the American Revolution as either radical or conservative. Of course, these suggestions are coming from a historian, who sees in this work the great potential to make stronger statements about nineteenth-century America via its anglophilia. Ultimately, *Anglophilia* left me with more questions about antebellum American culture than it answered. Did American cultural nationalism fail? Was the American Revolution conservative? Was the American experiment exceptional? Although she presents a convincing argument that the phenomenon of anglophilia was a solid component within the United States' antebellum culture, it is less clear how much of the nation was swept up in this frenzy. Certainly, many of the New England cultural arbiters were. But, did immigrants, slaves, southerners and westerners buy into this as well? And if not, how does this influence the weightiness given to the phenomena within the nation? Tamarkin definitely hints at all these issues, but lacks what the historian is after; concrete conclusions on the nature of American culture revealed by anglophilia.

According to Tamarkin, anglophilia could exist as a centrifugal force in American culture because after the revolution England did not have to matter anymore. England's symbolic significance and America's staged deference could remain in the American national psyche precisely because England no longer enforced these. Instead, anglophilia remained significant to Americans as a sense of belonging, especially needed after their independence, or what she refers to as a "phenomenon of loss."[4] As such, England became a distant aesthetic object, capable of allure without the potential for degradation. It was not contradictory for Americans to create a national identity in their shared affection towards England, because after independence they could extend American loyalty to England of their own free will. Whether through "Monarch Love," "Imperial Nostalgia," "Freedom and Deference," or "The Anglophile academy," her four chapter titles, Tamarkin remind us that American anglophilia reveals a more complex, although less contradictory phenomena, than it may at first appear.

---

**3** *Ibid.*, xxxi.

**4** *Ibid.*, xxviii.