



# Taking Liberties: Early American Women's Magazines and Their Readers

*Amy B. Aronson*

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Unlike its British forebears, the early American magazine, or periodical miscellany, functioned in culture as a forum driven by manifold contributions and perpetuated by reader response. Arising in colonial Philadelphia, America's more democratic magazine sustained a range of conflicting ideas, norms, and beliefs?indeed, it promoted their very exchange. It invited and embraced competing voices, particularly during the first 75 years of the Republic. In this first-ever account of the early American magazine as a distinct form, Amy Beth Aronson reveals how such participatory dynamics and public visibility offered special advantages to women, especially to those with sufficient education, access, and financial means, for whom ladies magazines offered unusual opportunities for self-expression, collective discussion, and cultural response.

Moreover, the genre opened and sustained dialogue among contributors, whose competing voices played off each other, provoking rebuttal and revision by subsequent contributors and noncontributing readers. This free play of discourse positioned women's words in a uniquely productive way, offering a kind of community of women readers who, together, wrote and revised magazine content and collectively negotiated and authorized new language for a new public's use.

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