[Review of:] A New World of Words: Redefining Early American Literature / William C. Spengemann

MADSEN, Deborah Lea

This new book by William Spengemann continues the investigation initiated by his theoretical study, *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (1990). In the earlier book, Spengemann questions the ways in which American literary traditions are constructed by exploring the whole notion of "American literature" as an object of study. He begins by asking whether this category is purely a discursive creation or whether it names some external reality and, if the latter, how we can identify a given text as "American." In the present study, Spengemann applies one of his earlier conclusions to the practice of colonial literary study. He redefines the whole range of texts encompassed by the term "early" American literature by redefining what is meant by the national designation of "American" literature. Consequently, this is a very important study that bears upon current debates in literary theory about the representation of national identity, post-colonial politics, and the exclusions that have traditionally characterized the American literary canon. Even more significantly, the questions Spengemann asks have the capacity to transform what we think of as the remit of American Studies as an intellectual enterprise.

"American literature," for the purposes of Spengemann's analysis, is redefined not as a body of writing performed in a geographically-specific space—America—or by a writer of American citizenship but as "all writings in English that reflect or have been influenced by the discovery, exploration, and settlement of the New World." Thus, American literature becomes the cultural product of the colonial encounter. As a result, texts that have previously been the sole possession of the metropolitan culture—John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* are among those that Spengemann discusses—become available as part of a discourse that transcends narrow national barriers. It may be that scholars of British literature will be scandalized by such reappropriations of classic English texts, but Americanists, and specialists of the early period especially, must find this kind of approach both empowering and, once it has actually been articulated, obvious. Although the work of Milton, particularly, has in very recent studies been discussed within the context of his similarities with and influence upon New England Puritanism, no one has until now had the audacity to claim *Paradise Lost* as an American text. The indistinct nature of national boundaries and the problematical question of citizenship in the period before the Revolution of course opens up the whole issue of how the New World is to be distinguished from the Old and how "American" is to be separated from "British." Spengemann draws attention to the fact that these distinctions have always operated in favor of the metropolis at the expense of the colonies and, in relation to early American literature, this has meant a paucity of quality texts and a body of texts that are largely of historical interest as precursors to the great works of the nineteenth-century Renaissance.

This is an important and stimulating study. The insights Spengemann makes available could profitably be applied to later literary periods, and it is to be hoped that this book will inspire a fresh perspective upon trans-Atlantic cultural relationships.

Deborah L. Madsen
University of Leicester