

John Robbins, “Up in the Air: Balloonomania and Scientific Performance.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48.4 (2015): 521-38.

John Robbins’ wide-ranging article covers the late eighteenth-century period of early ballooning inaugurated in November 1783 with the first public demonstration in Paris. Drawing examples from the popular plays that featured balloons as a key theatrical device, Robbins contends that theatrical recreations of ballooning were important interventions in public scientific discourse. Theatrical imitations of ballooning, he argues, often acted to alleviate concerns about the rapidity of scientific discovery, as well as to involve the public in the process of experimentation by positioning them as witnesses to restaged aeronautic experiments. To this end Robbins begins by surveying eighteenth-century popular science, demonstrating the importance of ballooning as a new kind of democratization of scientific method.

Ballooning was accessible to large numbers of people both technically (it was relatively easy to construct one’s own balloon) and financially (public flights were often financed through small advanced sums from hundreds of people). Because of this, ballooning can be read, as Robbins suggests, alongside the development towards scientific social inclusion, from Isaac Newton’s desire to maintain an exclusionary boundary around a scientific elite, to Humphrey Davy’s popular scientific performances aimed at educating and entertaining the general public. Positioning his argument in this way, Robbins concentrates his main points around a reading of Elizabeth Inchbald’s popular theatrical farce *The Mogul Tale: or, the Descent of the Balloon* (1784). Using this fascinating source material, he argues convincingly for the importance of stage ballooning as an arbitrator of popular scientific ideas and developments.

Robbins spends considerable time usefully explicating the contexts within which Inchbald’s play was written and performed. The first half of the article is concerned with positioning early conceptions of ballooning within wider cultural contexts, most obviously the incredible fascination which ballooning held for the general public, but also the dangers of ballooning, including an apparent fear in Britain of a French aerial invasion. These contexts are helpful and Robbins covers them skilfully, but I felt there was a missed opportunity to address some of the examples Robbins cites in greater detail. For example, in making use of Anna Barbauld’s poem, “Washing Day” (1797), Robbins comments on her use of balloons as a metaphor for “the unbounded capacity of the imagination,” a sufficiently broad metaphor to allow for the collapsing of divisions between a bewildering array of cultural binaries: “past and present, male and female, nature and human technologies, and work and play” (522-23). The wealth of material Robbins covers is fascinating and I could not help but wish there had been time to dwell in greater detail on them or to more clearly delineate them in a single strand of eighteenth-century scientific and technological thinking. How, for instance, Barbauld’s poem operates in terms of explicit scientific discourses, remains unclear, as does the relation of this kind of imaginative poetic ballooning to the theatrical ballooning that forms the backbone of Robbins’ later argument.

The second half of the article comprises of a close inspection of Inchbald’s play, *The Mogul Tale*. This was a play that presented ballooning to a British audience even before real balloons had taken flight in Britain (the first successful flight in Britain was not until a few months after the play premiered). As such, Robbins

contends that it “functions as a ballooning demonstration in its own right,” a persuasive claim made more fascinating by Robbins’ previous description of how, due to a number of ill-received attempts at using actual balloons as stage props, this particular play used only a “small-scale mechanical balloon which could be raised and lowered from the top of the gallery with pulleys” (531). This fact alone must have been a powerful indictment of ballooning as a dangerous technology and Robbins is alert to this, relating, for example, one of Inchbald’s characters to the amateurs who staged balloon demonstrations “without any scientific credentials or understanding,” resulting in fires and explosions (533). Such a reading is persuasive and provides a useful exploration of popular conceptions of ballooning as both a scientific endeavour and as an entertainment. It would be interesting to find out more about the relation of stage technologies to those technologies they imitate – is this a profoundly different dynamic from those, presumably similar, stage technologies which imitated supernatural flight (for example, of witches, demons and spirits)?

Robbins’ article gives a rich account of ballooning in the late eighteenth century and readers interested in the popular presentation and reception of new technology and scientific development will find it valuable. If there is a fault in Robbins’ article it is only that there is not sufficient space in an article length piece to do full justice to the material he has brought together. Questions about the roles of nationalism and imperialism are suggested but not fully addressed, nor is the significance of different generic and stylistic conventions and contexts. The importance of the article, however, lies in its persuasive emphasis on reading theatrical texts within a specific context of scientific and technological development. In providing an example of this kind of reading, the article is all the more successful for the interesting and varied questions it raises.

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