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## Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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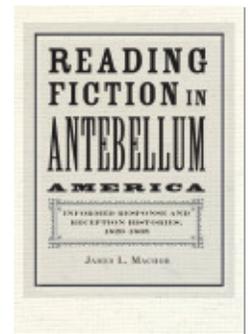
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## PREFACE

In the first chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt explains that his motivation for writing the book, as a new historicist, was his desire to speak to the dead. My reason for undertaking this book has been just the opposite. As a reception studies critic, I wanted the dead to speak to us. What I was interested in hearing, moreover, were not narratives of cultural and literary negotiations but the experiences of reading texts and particularly of reading fiction. However, I rediscovered early in the project something I had already known but often placed in the back of my mind: the dead do not speak very openly or extensively about their reading acts. When they do, the traces of their voices are frequently buried in musty, obscure volumes and far-away archives. It is difficult for us to hear and understand those voices not only because they are hard to find but also because the dead do not give up their traces of responses without mediation—in the form of further reading acts. We get at historical readers and their responses to texts, that is, only by doing readings of readings, and such doings can only obliquely be called finding. Reception historians do not so much discover reading acts and responses in the past. Instead, as I have come to realize in the course of doing the analysis of receptions that forms this book, historians of reading do the same thing readers do: we (re)make texts by creating patterns and making sense of them. Reading and interpretation consist of making sense in the double meaning of those words, as an act at once of deciphering and constructing.

In chapter 1, I discuss this issue more theoretically and in more detail, in a way that seeks to explain what it is we do when we study historical receptions and what we can do to advance such work. For reception study itself has had a history, and chapter 1 traces it out briefly—particularly in the form it has taken in literary criticism and in the history of the book—before moving on to the theoretical concerns relevant to

reception study as a whole and especially to what I have called historical hermeneutics. The chapter also explains why the reception of American fiction in the antebellum United States is an especially appropriate focus for such historical investigation, while at the same time positioning reception events before the Civil War in the context of several important cultural, economic, and demographic factors. The last part of the chapter specifies the reasons for choosing the four authors whose fiction was the object of the antebellum reception events examined in Part II, as well as for choosing the materials for examining the reception of fiction in the United States from approximately 1820 to 1865. Whenever possible I have drawn on responses from both the private and public spheres, but this study focuses especially upon evidences of reception activities in the latter, manifested most markedly in responses by periodical reviewers. As I explain in chapter 1, there are several good reasons for concentrating on this particular interpretive community, though I want to anticipate one of them here, so as to underscore its relation to one of the book's concerns. Part of my interest in this study is the impact of nineteenth-century readers' responses on fiction writers themselves, particularly on the way they thought about their work and its (and their) relations to their contemporary audiences. While doing this volume I have become absolutely convinced that these writers' conceptions of those relations depended heavily on the public reception of their texts, especially as it played out in the leading periodicals of the time.

Accordingly, chapter 2 turns to a detailed discussion of the various, interrelated components of what I have called "informed" fiction reading in the antebellum United States, which manifested itself most visibly in the public sphere. This chapter charts the various interpretive conventions and reading strategies that formed the basis for the public—and to a certain degree, the private—reception and interpretation of particular novels and short stories by American writers. These strategies at times anticipated twentieth- and twenty-first century interpretive practices but at other times differed markedly from the way people, and especially academic critics, read today. The materials examined in this chapter come from periodicals selected according to three criteria: geographical diversity, circulation, and longevity. Magazines from cities in New England (Boston), the middle-Atlantic states (New York City and Philadelphia), the South (Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans), and the

trans-Alleghenies West (Cincinnati) were chosen to cover a representative geographical cross section of the antebellum United States. Although magazine circulation figures between 1820 and 1870 vary widely, sufficient information exists (including data in the U.S. censuses for 1840, 1850, and 1860) to indicate that all of the magazines used in this chapter reached a circulation of four thousand or above, which was more than twice the average circulation for periodicals in this period and the equivalent of the circulations of the *New Republic* and the *Nation* today. Finally, I selected magazines that lasted at least fifteen to twenty years, a number that signaled significant success in terms of continued audience appeal and sustained distribution.

Part II of the book consists of four chapters that offer what I have called *case studies* of the nineteenth-century receptions of the work of four different fiction writers. Chapter 3 is devoted to the antebellum reception of Edgar Allan Poe. Discussing at first Poe's conception of his relation to the contemporary fiction-reading public and his connection to and knowledge of the practices of informed reading, especially through his editing and reviewing work with several different periodicals, the chapter then turns to the changing shape of Poe's reception and to his sometimes elated and at other times dismayed responses to it. In part my concern is the dynamic movements in the experiences of readers who would have come to his tales through the strategies of informed reading. The main thrust of the chapter, however, is to map out the striking change in the conception of Poe's fiction—and of Poe as a fiction writer—from the mid-1830s through the 1840s.

Chapter 4 focuses on another canonical American author, Herman Melville, whose antebellum status was quite different from Poe's. While Melville began as a highly popular author, his fiction quickly fell into disfavor in the early 1850s. Most modern Melvillians have explained that descent by depicting Melville as the quintessentially brilliant but misunderstood writer, who grew increasingly alienated from and disdainful of his contemporary readers because they failed to respond to and appreciate the genius and complexity of his novels. This chapter offers a different perspective on Melville's career and his relation to his antebellum audience, arguing that the reception of his fiction before 1858 was both more complex and more nuanced, that the downward trajectory of his fiction-writing career was not as neatly linear nor as dour as is usually

depicted, and that his repeatedly changing conceptions of—rather than growing disdain for—his audience became a problematic part of that reception history.

Chapter 5 focuses on a writer who was both popular and critically acclaimed in her own day but who fell into obscurity in the second half of the nineteenth century and remained largely unacknowledged and unread through most of the twentieth, until her recovery in the 1980s. The question this chapter asks is “Whatever happened to Catharine Sedgwick?” The answer it offers is multifaceted and involves the interconnections among the highly productive relations Sedgwick enjoyed with publishers, the way those publishers promoted and republished her novels, and the major shift in the public perception of her fiction—and the type of fiction writer she came to be known as—from the 1830s to the 1840s and 1850s. The irony at the center of Sedgwick’s reception history before the Civil War is that her very successes turned out to be factors in her neglect for nearly a century and a half afterward.

The final case-study chapter turns its attention to a writer who was not widely read in the nineteenth century and who today is not only outside the canon but virtually unknown: Caroline Chesebro’. Yet the reception history of Chesebro’s fiction possesses some intriguing contours. Despite her lack of notoriety, she maintained a successful regimen of novel publishing from the early 1850s until just before her death in the early 1870s, and her novels and story collections were regularly reviewed—and praised—in many of the most prestigious magazines in mid-nineteenth-century America. It was, in other words, not because of neglect by the public sphere before and immediately after the Civil War that Chesebro’ fell into such obscurity that even the feminist recovery projects of the 1980s and after have overlooked her fiction. Something else about the ways her novels were read has been at work in the twentieth- and twenty-first century neglect of Chesebro’, and the goal of chapter 6 is to offer some answers grounded—like the reception histories of Melville and Sedgwick—in the responses to Chesebro’s fiction in nineteenth-century America.

The book’s final chapter consists of a combination of extended applications and of returns. The first section examines some of the implications that reception study, and historical hermeneutics in particular, can have for genre and our conceptions of it, as well as for narratives of lit-

erary history, especially the conventional literary history of nineteenth-century American fiction. The latter portion of the chapter then returns to several of the theoretical issues discussed in chapter 1 and offers some additional explorations into the problems of and reasons for doing reception histories.



In the course of writing these chapters I have incurred substantial debts to a number of colleagues, friends, and institutions. For offering encouragement and a bracing intellectual collegiality over many years, I want to thank John Carlos Rowe, John Hellmann, Janet Staiger, and Patrocínio Schweickart. A special thanks goes to Phil Goldstein, not only for his friendship but also for working with me on other projects and professional endeavors, which have deepened and reinforced my sense of the value of doing reception study. Several colleagues have read all or parts of this work, and I wish to thank them for their perceptive critiques and valuable suggestions: Steve Mailloux, Gregory Eiselein, Barbara Hochman, and Janice Radway. Several librarians have been most helpful in enabling me to access important research materials: Paul Mercer of the New York State Library at Albany; Adrian Zahnier, Virginia Reynolds, and especially Betty Milum of Ohio State University; Kathy Coleman and Lori Fenton of Kansas State University; Nicholas Graham of the Massachusetts Historical Society; Yvonne Schofer of the University of Wisconsin; and Raynelda Calderon of the New York Public Library.

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I am grateful to the following institutions for permission to quote from previously unpublished archival materials: the Massachusetts Historical Society for items from the Catharine Maria Sedgwick Papers used in chapter 5; the Department of Special Collections, General Library System, University of Wisconsin-Madison for a brief passage used in chapter 6; and the Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations for materials from the Alfred Williams Anthony collection and the Robert Bonner, William Conant Church, and Duyckinck family papers, also used in chapter 6.

This volume has been, in a sense, a percolating project of long duration, emerging from a series of smaller ventures that saw the light of day as earlier manifestations in other venues. Accordingly, I wish to thank the following journals for the right to include in this study some of my previously published work. A small segment of the first part of chapter 1 originally appeared in “The Object of Interpretation and Interpretive Change” in *MLN* (© 1998 by The Johns Hopkins University Press). Parts of “Fiction and Informed Reading in Nineteenth-Century America,” which was published in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (© 1992 by The University of California Press), are incorporated into chapters 1 and 2. Brief sections of chapter 2 previously appeared in “Poetics as Ideological Hermeneutics,” in *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy*. The first section of chapter 3 derives from “Mastering Audiences: Poe, Fiction, and Antebellum Reading,” originally published in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* and reprinted by permission of the Board of Regents of Washington State University. I also want to thank the Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to reuse in chapters 1, 2, and 7 some material from my essay “Historical Hermeneutics and Antebellum Fiction: Gender, Response Theory, and Interpretive Contexts,” originally published in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, as well as from my introduction to that book.

As always, among those who have made contributions to my work, none has been more important than my wife, Nancy. Through the years she has continually been nearby, especially when needed most, in ways that make everything possible. To her this book is dedicated with unending love.