Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret

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Although Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson differed dramatically in terms of their lives and writing careers, they shared not only a distaste for writing “for the street” (mass readership) but a preference for the intimate writer-reader relationship created by private publication, especially in the form of manuscripts. In Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret: Melville, Dickinson, and Private Publication, Michael Kearns shows that this distaste and preference were influenced by American copyright law, by a growing tendency in America to treat not only publications but their authors as commodities, and by the Romantic stereotype of the artist (usually suffering in a garret) living only for his or her own work.

For both Melville and Dickinson, private publication could generate the prestige accorded to authors while preserving ownership of both works and self. That they desired such prestige, Kearns demonstrates by a close reading of biographical details, publication histories, and specific comments on authorship and fame. This information also reveals that Melville and Dickinson regarded their manuscripts as physical extensions of themselves while creating personae to protect the privacy of those selves. Much modern discourse about both writers has accepted as biographical fact certain elements of those personae, especially that they were misunderstood artists metaphorically confined to garrets.

Michael Kearns is professor of English at the University of Southern Indiana.

“Writing for the Street, Writing in the Garret succeeds thanks to Michael Kearns’ detailed knowledge of these two writers’ lives and personae. He handles with zest the scholarship that long regarded Dickinson and Melville as apparent failures, particularly with regard to market forces. Readers will appreciate the ironies that Kearns underscores as he relates these writers’ lives to their posthumous reputations and to the strange circumstances that still dictate how Dickinson and Melville are known and read today.”
—Elizabeth Horan, professor of English, Arizona State University

“Michael Kearns’ book is elegantly written and a genuine pleasure to read. Kearns knows thoroughly the scholarship on both writers and conducts a sort of clinic on a number of theoretical approaches to their works. His argument is patient and never rushed. In many ways, Kearns’ is a model of its kind.”
—James D. Wallace, associate professor of English, Boston College

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Cover images: Herman Melville, 1944 etching after a portrait by Joseph O. Eaton, c. 1891; Emily Dickinson, oil over daguerreotype, c. 1848; background image © Nataliya Hora/Veer.
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