



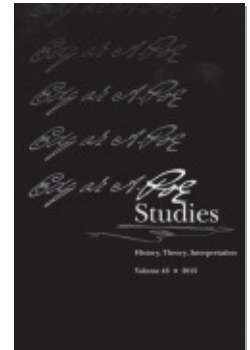
PROJECT MUSE®

Writing and Reception in Antebellum America

Philip Edward Phillips

Poe Studies, Volume 44, Number 1, 2011, pp. 101-105 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/poe.2011.0009



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/poe/summary/v044/44.1.phillips.html>

Writing and Reception in Antebellum America

James L. Machor. *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820–1865*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2011. 424 pp. \$75.00 cloth.

In this latest of his publications, James L. Machor, Professor of English at Kansas State University, builds upon his previous research on nineteenth-century American literature, readers, and reception theory—*Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (1993), *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies* (2000), and *New Directions in American Reception Study* (2008). As its title announces, Machor’s new study examines ways in which readers received, read, and interpreted works of antebellum American fiction. In doing so, the study considers what it meant to be an “informed reader” of literature during a historical period distinguished by the prominence of literary magazines, and it explores the implications of reception theory, including “historical hermeneutics,” in its detailed treatments of the works and literary historical contexts of four representative, but not equally well-known, American authors: Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Catharine Sedgwick, and Caroline Chesebro’. The book, which is written for an academic audience at the graduate level or above, gives as much attention to reception theory as it does to the critical analysis of the works, their contemporary reception, and their interpretation in the antebellum era and later. Machor aims to elucidate the complex relationship of the authors with their reading public, and the reading strategies and practices that inform and influence our own readings of those authors and their audience.

Machor divides his study into two major sections. Part 1 defines and explores the significance of “historical hermeneutics,” reception theory, and conventions of reading in antebellum America as well as prevailing interpretive strategies that constitute what Machor calls “informed reading” during the period. Part 2 applies the theoretical and critical approaches enumerated in part 1 to the works of Poe, Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro’, taking into account the critical reception of those authors’ works as well as their responses to published reviews of their works. The book closes with a consideration of the ongoing implications of reception studies, especially “historical hermeneutics,” with respect to current approaches to genre theory and nineteenth-century American literary history.

Noting that “reading is not only a private act but also an intersubjective, social practice” [3], Machor begins by making the case for a “historical hermeneutics,” or theory of interpretation, capable of “reconstruct[ing] the shared patterns of interpretation for a specific historical era to define the reading formation of particular interpretive communities” [7]. He takes great pains throughout his study to avoid relying on any kind of “textual essentialism” [9] while applying a historical hermeneutical approach to texts, authors, and audiences—examining what is “interpreted” and what is “theorized.” Machor’s reading considers the modes of literary production, the means of literary dissemination, the practices of the authors, and the expectations of the reading public, among other factors, in order to illustrate the intersubjectivity of reading in antebellum America. One of the most interesting issues explored in part 1 is the way in which the “intersection of periodical reviews, public interpretation, and middle-class reading constituted an important context not only for the reading of fiction but also for its production” [32]. In this light, Machor focuses on Poe, who maintained that many contemporary readers derived their “opinions” about fiction from “the journals of the day” [32]. Given that perception, neither Poe nor his fellow writers could ignore this community of readers or the “opinions” that informed and influenced its reading. Calling attention to Poe’s membership in the community of “magazinists” as a reviewer himself, Machor discusses the ways in which Poe adapted his work simultaneously to accommodate and to disrupt readers’ expectations in a power play between author and audience. Because of Poe’s role as fiction writer and literary critic, his prominence in this study makes perfect sense, as does the inclusion of Melville, whose canonical status was in question because of declining popularity throughout his career but is now assured. As for the other case studies, Machor writes that Sedgwick was “popular and acclaimed” in her own time “but marginalized today,” while Chesebro’ experienced “mixed success in [her] own day” and suffers “neglect in ours” [34]. The selection of these four authors, according to Machor, enables us to explore the “parallels and contrasts between our own reading formulations and those of the antebellum era” [34].

The discussion of “interpretive strategies” and “informed reading” that constitutes the second half of part 1 considers the role of reviewers, editors, and other “magazinists” as “watchdogs”—as previous critics have dubbed them—concerned with preserving tradition and sustaining public morals. Machor goes further, though, by examining their awareness of the democratizing aspect of reading and their awareness of their role as “part of the ‘people’ acting as its informed agents” [38]. One of the many strengths of Machor’s study is his insistence that “reading” and “reception” were influenced by magazinists,

whose reviews (a rich range of which Machor includes) provided strategies for the interpretation of literary texts by middle-class readers as well as by “informed readers” themselves. According to Machor, authors attempted to validate their artistic values and expectations while concomitantly disrupting those values and expectations when writing for their audiences.

Machor begins the first of his case studies (chap. 3) with the statement, “Among nineteenth-century American writers, perhaps no one had a more acute sense of audience than Edgar Allan Poe,” who “defined fiction and poetry as discourses intrinsically involved with reception” [87]. In this chapter—derived from “Mastering Audiences: Poe, Fiction, and Antebellum Reading,” originally published in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* [47 (2001): 163–83]—Machor examines Poe’s involvement with magazines, from his early reading of British periodicals to his various editorships of and contributions to some of the leading American periodicals of his day. Machor astutely notes that, despite Poe’s hostile attitude toward the literati of New York and Boston, especially those cliques who “puffed up” the works of their own members and ignored or dismissed those of outsiders, “Poe nevertheless was deeply embedded in their practices,” as demonstrated by the general similarities between his published critical opinions and those of his contemporary reviewers [88–89]. Interestingly, Machor observes, Poe “tended to exaggerate his differences from other reviewers, sometimes by creating readerly straw men” [89] in order to win readers over to his own side—an effective tactic for one who wanted to build and maintain a loyal and admiring readership.

Poe’s notion of the successful author, according to Machor, involved achieving “authorial mastery over the reading experience” [92]. Putting it more forcefully, he argues that Poe was engaged in a “virtual battle for authority, waged as both frontal assault and guerilla warfare” [93–94], in which he sought to destabilize readers’ understanding of his authorial identity in any given literary text. In short, Poe’s strategy “involved maintaining a balance between eliciting admiration [from his readers] while dominating the fiction reading audience” [96]. This balance required literary wizardry, however, whose spell could easily be broken if the reader could fully comprehend the artistic genius behind the magic.

In the same chapter, Machor argues that, while most twenty-first-century readers associate Poe’s works with the gothic genre and “the *frisson* of horror,” most of his contemporary readers (at least during the 1830s, less so in the 1840s) “identified him as a writer of comic tales” [96] and read him accordingly. The discussion that follows, however, considers Poe’s use of gothic elements, or Germanic mysticism, as it was regarded then, in his fiction. Machor demonstrates that Poe simultaneously embraced the traditional

meanings associated with gothic conventions and parodied those conventions in an attempt to disrupt readers' equilibrium and maintain authorial control of his subject matter. But such a balancing act could prove deleterious to an author, given the preconceptions that informed readers of the 1830s could bring to a text such as "Ligeia." Even such sympathetic readers as his contemporary, Philip Pendleton Cooke, regarded the narrator of the tale as "Poe himself" [119], a reading that showed the reader had been "disoriented," but not necessarily in the way Poe would have wished [119–20]. Interestingly, according to Machor, other readers—both Poe's detractors, such as the Reverend Rufus Griswold, and his most steadfast defenders, such as Sarah Helen Whitman—would ironically "[contribute] to the reading of Poe as a version of his criminal and haunted narrators and to the assumption that his tales' characters were dark reflections of the man himself" [136–37]. Even these misreadings of Poe, and their widespread circulation then and their influence into our present age, were consequential: "From the perspective of historical hermeneutics, the significance of such responses and of their continued currency, both in and outside the academy, lies in their being the legacy of reception events that first took shape as interpretations of Poe's fictions construed by the codes of antebellum informed reading" [137]. Machor applies similar interpretive and theoretical criteria to his reading of the works and receptions of Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro', but those chapters fall outside the scope of the present review.

In his conclusion, Machor briefly considers the interpretive practices of the generation of American writers who flourished after the Civil War and calls into question one of the most widely accepted paradigms in nineteenth-century American literary historical studies—"the claim that romances and sentimental/domestic fictions dominated the literary marketplace, but that after the Civil War, realism, and to a lesser extent, naturalism, developed and soon became the leading forms of postbellum fiction in the United States" [299]. Applying the same reception theory to such postbellum authors as William Dean Howells and Mark Twain as previously applied to antebellum authors, Machor suggests that in their criticism of such earlier authors as James Fenimore Cooper and Charles Dickens, postbellum proponents of "realism" not only were "seeking to create an audience" but also were "modeling a way for that audience to read for realism—or its absence—in previous fiction as well as in their own fiction" [304]. Thus, Machor suggests, what could be argued of Poe earlier in the study could be argued of Howells and Twain. From the reception-studies angle, Machor would have us regard the postbellum era as "one marked by a shift not so much in genre forms," such as the romance-to-realism paradigm, "as in reading formations" [312]. Returning to

his initial theoretical premises, Machor reiterates the view that reception study offers “us a different way of seeing the past and seeing reading as contextual interpretive encounters” [318]. His case studies of Poe, Melville, Sedgwick, and Chesebro’—with their emphasis on the contemporary reception of those authors’ works and those authors’ relationships with their readers—effectively illustrate the value of his theoretical approach to antebellum American fiction.

In sum, Machor presents a rich and well-researched volume that is theoretically driven yet not prescriptive or dogmatic in its claims. Furthermore, he calls on readers to reconsider what we know, or think we know, about the dominant genres and literary values of the antebellum era and to consider afresh the reader’s role—then and now—in the creation of “meaning” in a literary text. While *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America* would likely not appeal to a general audience, it has much to offer scholars and graduate students working in the areas of literary theory, genre theory, nineteenth-century literature, and American literary history.

Philip Edward Phillips
Middle Tennessee State University