Review: Review: The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture

Reviewed Work(s): The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture by Lara Langer Cohen

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regarding the evolution of the female psyche and identity as an artist. Parallels are drawn with female personae by other artists previously mentioned in the book (e.g., Charlotte Brontë), and a little-known novella by Sand, *Les Maîtres mosaïstes*, suggests Tintoretto's daughter was a prototype for the modern woman artist. Other revelations about the mother as muse admirably traverse new terrain. One of the most important conclusions Wettlaufer makes about *Elle et lui* is that it "proposes an alternate model of representation that subverts the dominance of the male phallic gaze" (p. 257).

The formal conclusion ends on a decidedly British note, chronicling first the formation of the Society of Female Artists and then the French system and opening of both joint or mixed artists' classes and special ones for women. On the one hand, this is an appropriate place and manner to conclude the book; yet on the other hand, some of the information on the status of women and the unavailability or extreme difficulty of proper professional training might also have been useful for readers at the outset of the book. Also, the attempt to update the female artist figure in later literature, centering upon Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, seems ill advised and out of place, inadequate to do justice to this vast topic and the directions it took in the twentieth-century novel. It might have been better perhaps to have ended with the mid-Victorian era than to try to condense subsequent developments and fast-forward to a single author and book, albeit one of such superb quality. Lastly, the final paragraph serves as more of a coda than a proper terminal point—arguably the issues raised might have also appeared earlier in this chapter, although this is a minor flaw that does not mar the overall excellent caliber of this publication and the many questions it raises and answers. Ultimately, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman* resounds with provocative ideas and is a solid contribution to the fields of Victorian literature as well as cultural and women's studies.

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Lara Langer Cohen, *The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and Antebellum Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. vi + 245. $59.95.

Reader, this book is no fraud. In fact, Lara Langer Cohen's *The Fabrication of American Literature: Fraudulence and*

Antebellum Print Culture not only carries its smart and consequential argument to very satisfyingly conclusive lengths, but it also saves us many a yawn in doing so, with its showman's sense of pith and pace. The book's main pitch is that antebellum literary fraud—which most of us tend to think of in terms of specific hoaxes, tall tales, pseudo-slave narratives, blackface minstrel songs, Ossianic forgeries, fakes, spoofs, and other print-masquerades—must be recognized not as a mere set of neatly circumscribed genres and subgenres but rather as the transgeneric, indeed rhetorically uncircumscribable, condition of fraudulence that made American literary nationalism itself both thinkable and practicable. And while there is perhaps a bit of P. T. Barnum in her dramatized claims for the distinctiveness of antebellum readers' relation to literary fraudulence, Cohen nevertheless very effectively highlights several specific conditions that made American literature of the 1820s to the 1850s such an acutely self-conscious and richly fecundating sort of humbug: the mobilization and proliferation of print media through technological advancements and economies of scale; the attendant nationalization of the market for commoditized literary artifacts; and the cultural visibility of the institution of "American literature" as such.

Cohen tracks this period of American literature, in its financial and technological specificity, through the force, heat, and especially the gas billowing from the era's print explosion—a series, in fact, of discursive detonations making for tense and disorderly relations in the fresh construction of social, aesthetic, and economic national domains. One of the book's laudable aims is to show us something of what the methods of book history have yet to offer literary history and practical criticism. Indeed, Cohen asserts the need for very broad methodological adjustments in this field-nexus—adjustments chiefly to the nature and scope of commitments to material objects and practices in contemporary scholarship, where she feels that the materialism of book history can still be excessively granular and that the materialism of Marxist criticism can still be excessively fictive.

Yet notwithstanding Cohen's own materialist approach, ethics is the most intriguing purview of her book. For wherever one looks in Cohen's antebellum literary landscape—populated as it is by an eclectic range of antebellum American authors and archly deemed "author malfunctions" (Edgar Allan Poe, Davy Crockett, James Williams, Fanny Fern, Frederick Douglass, and Herman Melville among them) working in a similarly eclectic range of genres (autobiography, short story, backwoods tall tale, blackface minstrelsy, didactic poem, slave narrative, newspaper column, and novel)—one is pointedly

shown, again and again, some collapsing horizon of authenticity. *The Fabrication of American Literature* is primarily, in fact, a portrait of American literature huffing and, mostly, "puffing" its way up and out of youthfully anemic uncertainty and into a profounder ambivalence regarding its own desirability as something tall, dark, and shifty. Promotion without regard to merit, Cohen demonstrates from her opening pages, was the literary mechanism not merely for inflating book sales and authorial reputations, but also for a fully structural transformation of the puffed-up sphere of American gigantism and national overexertion.

American literature was "made," in other words, as its producers learned to wreak havoc with an integrity they would otherwise be presumed either (if they began among the enfranchised) guiltily to cherish in themselves or (if they began among the despised) greedily to covet in others. So, for example, in Cohen's telling, elite writers like Poe and Melville wrest new authority from debased privilege by undermining the notion that fraud can reassuringly be located in individual genres or characters. Aspiring writers like Fern (Sara Payson Willis) find marketable advantages in puncturing the sorts of claims to originality that lend specious respectability to the literary marketplace. And the most marginalized writers like Williams and the purveyors of blackface minstrelsy and backwoods tall tales screw with mainstream authority even as they are being screwed by the self-authenticating protocols of white-dominated print culture.

Indeed, it's one thing to be submerged in vexed musings over one's relation to culture's shifting moral idioms if you are, say, Nathaniel Hawthorne ("Be true! Be true! Be true!"). But the affliction of fakeness is everywhere borne differently by those whose fraudulence is racialized or feminized to the point of depersonalization. If you are Frederick Douglass, for instance, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, then you will have found that the struggle to develop and entextualize an exigent self-conception is, for you, fundamentally conditioned, in a way that it could not possibly be for Hawthorne, by the social imposition of imposture as a form of being. Yet, as Cohen argues, it is antebellum America's particular contribution to the invention of authenticity—its literary elaboration, we might say, of modernity's peculiarly anxious polemic of human distinctiveness—to have creatively combined so many material advances in print culture with some of history's most extreme conditions of political insincerity. So, like Douglass and Stowe, Hawthorne and Melville too are brought willy-nilly to ask, in the world of slavery and women's subjugation they uncomfortably inhabit: is the righting and perpetuation of

democracy something that can occur in and through the literary mediation of social life?

We continue to puzzle over their responses to this question—not least because of its relevance to the study of our own contemporary culture. Appropriately, Cohen ends her book with a coda on the antebellum novel—Melville's *Confidence-Man*—that asked this question, for its own era, in the most sophisticated and yet almost entirely useless of ways, arriving as it did on the eve of the Civil War, just as the capacity to bear witness to the truth of personhood was about to be violently redistributed on a hitherto unimaginable scale. One wishes that Cohen had followed Melville (and Douglass) through and beyond that cataclysm in the dubious emancipation of the modern subject—not least in order to help us anticipate a much-needed reexamination of the significance of American literature's antebellum fabrication for the nation's later literary postures and impostures in the imperially puffed-up sphere of international modernism.

One learns from a book like this, in other words, to seek even more comprehensive investments in its attractively nondefensive pursuit of better forms of national literary history. Still, without wishing it or in any way needing it to be another book, *The Fabrication of American Literature* will unquestionably reward reading and subsequent revisiting in the classroom, where many of us will be reconnoitering its most demanding requirements for rethinking the endlessly engaging masquerade of antebellum literature itself.

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Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 321. $99.

No Victorian author enjoyed a more intimate, influential, and profitable relationship with his readers than Charles Dickens. Today, with the possible exception of Arthur Conan Doyle, no author of the era rivals him in terms of continued sales and adaptations. But if Dickens's appeal to the "mass" has never really been in doubt, the nature and lasting impact of that appeal—the "culture" generated by the Dickens industry in his own time and ours—remains the subject of critical debate. As this timely study makes clear, understanding the deliberate, complex ways in which Dickens sought to influence as broad a cross-section of readers as possible in his