

McGETTIGAN, Katie. 2023. *The Transatlantic Materials of American Literature: Publishing US Writing in Britain, 1830–1860*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. Pp. 320. ISBN 9781625346865, Hardcover \$90. ISBN 9781625346858, Paperback \$34.95.

Katie McGettigan's *The Transatlantic Materials of American Literature: Publishing US Writing in Britain, 1830–1860* offers the following contention: studies of American literature produced during the antebellum period have failed to consider the impact that British publishers and transatlantic book tradespeople had on notions of authorship and authorization, text and presentation, and nationhood and national ties. In this work, McGettigan invites readers to imagine American literature anew, suggesting that, by evaluating British editions of popular mid-nineteenth-century American texts, scholars can more faithfully render the history of those works and the hands and minds who produced them. Her readings of these editions are novel and intriguing. The book's introduction and first chapter begin by challenging notions of "authorization", bringing to the fore the history of authorized and unauthorized British reprints; copies of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poems serve as a primary example of "authorization" working outside of direct author approval. Chapters Two and Three highlight exceedingly well-made books and collected series from authors like Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, demonstrating how transatlantic publishing influenced both the received value of texts and how the literature of disparate authors came to form an imaginary, literary version of nationhood. In Chapter Six, McGettigan concludes by identifying how Black abolitionist authors sought a transatlantic subjectivity through print, but ultimately ran up against the racist, gatekeeping publishers who favored wealthier and more well-connected authors.

McGettigan begins by pointing out a glaring gap in early American book history research: there had not been a book-length study on the tangible impact of transatlantic printing on popular American literature from the antebellum period. She therefore evaluates how British publishers and book tradespeople legitimized or otherwise influenced antebellum American writers. Most scholars, she argues, have fallen into the trap of adhering to a rigid dichotomy of approved and unapproved reprints, a distinction which is frequently made by assessing copyright adherence. While there are distinctions to be drawn in considering publishers' attitudes — their regard or disregard for authorial approval and publishing decorum — both kinds of reprints contributed to the transatlantic legitimization of American works,

their authors, and their country's emergent identity (18–19). For this reason, McGettigan insists, both authorized and unauthorized British reprints should be treated as “authorizing”, in that they lend more credit to the literature than American printing alone; taken this way, early Americanists and book historians alike are enabled to “reimagine an historical era that we think we know well through new print objects and at new scales” (23). To demonstrate the interpretive payoff of incorporating previously dismissed “unauthorized” reprints in discussions of literary, authorial, or national formation, McGettigan turns in the first chapter to illustrated British reprints of Longfellow’s works. British reprints of Longfellow’s early poems, though not approved, led to two authorizing effects: credit provided by the inclusion of high-quality illustrations, which elevated the literary with imagery, and credit through reputation. While Longfellow struggled to have authorized versions of his poems reproduced for British audiences, unauthorized, beautifully illustrated editions published by David Bogue cemented his place in both the canon and market alike (42). As a direct result of this elevated position, publishers sought out the author to produce legitimate copies of his works, thereby “embed[ding] his writing and his hero into a diachronic and transnational literary culture” (51). McGettigan makes it clear that the distinction between authorized and unauthorized was not only flimsy but could also be readily changed by way of illustration or market approval — and that such changes impacted the reputation of works and their authors.

Authorization alone did not mark a definite path to success for antebellum American authors or their works. Rather, as Chapter Two shows, esteemed British publishers, like John Murray and Richard Bentley, were known for exceptionally well-made or copyright-adherent reprints, qualities which elevated, albeit in different ways and with many exceptions, the status of authors and texts. McGettigan explores the desirability of the aforementioned British publishers, showing why they were sought out as well as what their editions meant for authors. She highlights publisher’s early editions — namely, Murray’s and Bentley’s early handlings of works by Washington Irving and Cooper. “US writers approached Murray and Bentley because they believed these firms could make their names” where less notable publishers could not, “but also because they liked the material texts these firms produced” (71). However, entrusting these firms came with a cost for less-connected authors: publishers could, and did, gatekeep not only literature but authors too. Publishers like Bentley printed selected works from American women; however, as McGettigan astutely notes, “[t]he lack of black authors”, for instance, “reflects [. . .] the racial

gatekeeping in the literary trade”, illustrating that access to authorization was not at all equal nor equally rewarding (77). Investment from reputable and esteemed publishers was not smooth sailing for authors, as in Murray’s and Bentley’s treatment of Melville’s *Typee* (1846) and *Moby-Dick* (1851). Murray, known for his official ties to government and reprints of travel and exploratory literature, set about making changes to *Typee*, including lengthening the title to make it like previous publications he handled; in response, Melville introduced edits which questioned the “empirical observations” that characterized travel and exploratory writing itself (79, 82). Likewise, Bentley, who had handled *White-Jacket* (1850), was caught in copyright battles against unauthorized publishers which threatened to muddy the waters regarding the publication of *Moby-Dick*; astutely aware of this situation, Melville, writing from British “copyright limbo”, provided commentary in the novel by likening scavengers and cheats in the publishing world to similar characters in the whaling world, “allegoriz[ing] the precarious position in which British copyright law placed [him] and [other] American authors” (90, 93).

Chapter Three continues this evaluation of the power of publishers to shape readers’ perceptions of American writers, their works, and the nation by bringing attention to the authorizing power of a British series (often called a “Library”). English-printed collections of American-authored literature, argues McGettigan, gave texts and authors social and literal capital by integrating them into much hyped collections which, in name and function, promised to give readers a more complete experience of standardized American literature. McGettigan explains that “canonical works were published in series, and publication in a series denoted a work as canonical”, an effect that, starting with the Standard Novel series’ reproduction of Cooper’s *The Pilot* (1824), followed by William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), and Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821) thereafter, gave form to transatlantic notions of American literature (107, 108). But one text alone does not a canon make. To this point, McGettigan shows how, by virtue of material choices — including formatting, presentation, and paratexts — these British series shaped and reshaped the sense of American literature by bringing together seemingly disparate works. In one example, McGettigan demonstrates how William Smith’s Standard Library “equaliz[ed] the authors of Britain, Europe, and America” by skirting copyright to make cheaply constructed reprints of titles from American authors, such as Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Home* (1835) and *The Linwoods* (1835), and George H. Colton’s *Tecumseh* (1842), with the aim of distributing the series far and wide, among a variety of people (112, 113, 119). While such choices

were made for marketing reasons, the literary and national impact was clear: American works became conversant not only within their own material spaces, but also within the larger spatial relations of literature and national notions of other, more historicized countries. McGettigan concludes the chapter by cleverly reading the illustrations in the Universal Library edition of Emerson's *Essays and Orations* (1853) alongside the text. McGettigan asserts that, though the opening illustration of Emerson's home would have been "entirely foreign to its British readers", it demonstrates Emerson's calls for a "native" or national "literature" by visualizing the author's locale and achievement (130, 132).

But what of those authors to whom print meant more than literary fame or fortune? What about authors who turned to the press for more fundamentally existential reasons? In Chapter Six, McGettigan rounds out her work by exploring what British publications meant for authors who turned to the transatlantic book trade to experience belonging and dignity: formerly enslaved Black abolitionists. McGettigan, echoing Paul Gilroy, says that the transatlantic book trade was a site for Black abolitionists to form their transatlantic subjectivity, which is to say identities as authors not mired by "the dehumanizing logic and practices of slavery" — something they were prevented from doing in the United States (205, 213). McGettigan also reveals traces of the arduous, gatekept, and racist waters of British publication. Specifically, she locates pushback to the formation of transatlantic subjectivity in the publication histories of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) and John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia* (1855), albeit for different reasons. In Northup's publication history, McGettigan finds striking repetitions of dehumanization and commodification. Despite being free from slavery, Northup was not free from once again being turned into a "legible and saleable object rather than an authorial subject" (222). In Brown's brush with British publishing, this time within the confines of an abolitionist society's printing operation, McGettigan finds, once again, subjectivity being stifled. This time, however, it is not the formerly enslaved man being marketed so much as it is him being enslaved to his contract. McGettigan shows that, while the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) did aid Brown in his search for transatlantic subjectivity *vis-à-vis* taking his story to the press, these nominal allies nonetheless undermined that endeavor by placing the author in what was effectively authorship indentured servitude by forcing him to pay the society back for each copy of his narrative sold (227). This, then, begs

the question: under what circumstances, or in what environment, were the formerly enslaved not prevented from actualizing their transatlantic subjectivity? The answer, McGettigan contends, lies in the publication histories of the more authoritative and well-connected Black abolitionist authors Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. Unlike the aforementioned authors, Douglass and Wells Brown were more widely recognized, better connected in both abolitionist and printing circles, and more authoritative about the reprinting of their works overseas (244). McGettigan argues that well-connected Black writers were able to control the English publication of their works more directly and therefore fashion a clearer transatlantic subjectivity more tightly than Northup or Brown. The result is, at least in their lifetimes, that Douglass and Wells Brown enjoyed a kind of authorship-derived subjectivity that other Black abolitionists, attempting to print their stories for the same reasons, could not attain.

*The Transatlantic Materials of American Literature* is useful for early Americanists and book historians alike because it asks scholars to reconsider their knowledge of a period and conceptions they think they already have a good grasp on. Simply put: McGettigan convincingly argues that the transatlantic book trade, particularly British publishers, had a large role to play in the reception, preservation, and evaluation of texts from American authors, or authors who saw themselves as transatlantic. For all the book does to shift the way researchers read history and texts, though, the text is not without its minor missteps. Chapters Four and Five, while novel in that they offer various interpretive possibilities for Americanists and book historians hoping to reevaluate the relationship between the transatlantic book trade and literary canon, seem misplaced in this study. Chapter Four's likening of the trade to stage plays seems better fit for its own book-length study; similarly, Chapter Five's focus on gift books, while important for understanding the reception of texts among transatlantic audiences, focuses more on readership and reception than authorship and publication — thereby taking focus away from the main line of argumentation in the book. Beyond this, there are few critiques to level at the book. If you are an early Americanist or book historian who wishes to move beyond the confines of interpreting American literature in geographical isolation, then this text will be helpful for you.

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