

***The Moral Economies of American Authorship: Reputation, Scandal, and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Marketplace.* By Susan M. Ryan. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 2016. x, 217 pp. Cloth, \$69.00; e-book available.**

***Plagiarama! William Wells Brown and the Aesthetic of Attractions.* By Geoffrey Sanborn. New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 2016. 212 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; e-book, \$59.99.**

William Wells Brown plagiarized. Fully 23 percent of his most widely read novel, *Clotel* (1853), was taken from the work of other writers. By the end of his career, Brown had plagiarized eighty-seven thousand words from 282 separate texts and 265 different authors. Yet simply describing the scope of his plagiarism fails to do justice to the vaudevillian, exuberant style of his copying. After Frederick Douglass published an article noting Brown's down-the-rabbit-hole style of literary theft (Brown had plagiarized from a speech of Benjamin Disraeli, who had been caught for plagiarizing *the same speech* from Adolphe Thiers), Brown followed up by plagiarizing from Douglass's former newspaper, the *North Star*. Afterward, in the January 1863 issue of *Douglass's Monthly*, Douglass wryly notes that Brown "seems to have read and remembered nearly everything" available, but he does not explicitly note the borrowing (Brown [1874], *The Rising Son* [Boston], 23, quoted in Sanborn, 39). Brown did not stop there. He copied from popular jokes that would have been recognizable to thousands of newspaper readers. He even plagiarized from an essay on plagiarism. His copying was at once absurd, bracing, poetic, critical, and entertaining.

Indeed, nineteenth-century authors could be absolutely scandalous with their plagiarizing, their love affairs, their quarrels with neighbors, their lawsuits, their acts of domestic violence, their rumored incestuous relationships, and their moral grandstanding. Students of the nineteenth century have long been aware of such scandals, but two new books ask us to think about these crises of moral authority in different, less moralizing ways.

In *The Moral Economies of American Authorship*, Susan M. Ryan returns to the scene of nineteenth-century authorial scandals to reconsider why "we want our representative authors . . . to be good people, people whose politics—racial, cultural, and otherwise—do not embarrass us" (14). The "we" to whom Ryan refers includes twenty-first-century readers as much as their nineteenth-century corollaries. Certainly, James Fenimore Cooper tarnished his reputation among moralizing nineteenth-century readers by attempting to exile his neighbors from his land and to silence his critics with libel lawsuits (50). Yet twenty-first-century readers and even scholars can moralize as well. As Ryan points out, proslavery writers such as Sarah Josepha

Hale and William Gilmore Simms receive far less critical attention than, for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Herman Melville. Even these latter authors, moreover, occasionally receive opprobrium. As Ryan observes, Melville's star has dimmed a bit since Elizabeth Renker's suggestion in 1994 that the author of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and "Benito Cereno" had likely beaten his wife, Elizabeth Shaw Melville. Ryan's goal is not to defend those who defended the indefensible, or whose behavior was indefensible, but to provide a "genealogy of authorship's moral compacts" (22). Indeed, she forcefully rejects the argument that what we need is a kind of "post-moralism," an agnostic examination of authorship that brackets questions of moral authority in favor of other concerns, such as influence or aesthetics. Instead, Ryan hopes to put moralism itself at the center of our scholarly discourse. What exactly are we insisting on when we insist that our authors prefigure or reflect our own moral judgments? How might we understand the moral judgments of the past as continuous or discontinuous with those of our own time?

Geoffrey Sanborn's monograph appears almost to answer Ryan's call for a new approach to questions of proper authorial behavior. In *Plagiarama!* Sanborn dissects Brown's acts of authorial theft, borrowing, and reinvention. While Brown's habit of plagiarizing is known in scholarly circles (and particularly noted in the case of *Clotel*), Sanborn is indispensable for the thoroughness of his examination of the author's plagiarism. In the appendices to *Plagiarama!* Sanborn catalogs every case of lifted language and every boosted bit of prose, noting the original source and the total number of words taken. Yet Sanborn's work is indispensable for another reason as well. He asks his readers to consider what exactly we mean by *plagiarism* and why it matters. In the case of an academic term paper, for instance, the risks of plagiarism are obvious. Students write to demonstrate their intellectual engagement and, often, to receive academic credit. Plagiarism defeats this purpose. But, as Sanborn points out, plagiarism "only defeats the purpose of a work of literature if that purpose is imagined to include something that it does not, in fact, necessarily include: the modeling of an autonomously creative subjectivity" (18). Brown's work elevated plagiarism to a spectacular kind of art form. He ironically praised the originality of public figures using unoriginal language. He pilfered fetishistic prose describing violence against black bodies but eliminated the obscene culmination of that violence. Brown left his readers, in other words, haunted by the sadism that endlessly iterated across nineteenth-century mass culture, but he pulled the curtain down at the last moment. As Sanborn suggests, Brown might well be the "most original artist of nonoriginality in American literary history" (17). Brown, in short, elevated plagiarism to high art.

Except, of course, when he did not. Sometimes, as Sanborn observes, Brown simply stole—to catch a particularly evocative bit of language, to keep the plot moving, or to flesh out a description. The writers in Ryan's *Moral Economies of American Authorship* likewise tend to disappoint either a contemporary moral sensibility or a nineteenth-century one. Yet, as she observes,

“authorship’s moral economies have structured” critical practices in US literary studies. Scholars can take on a “quasi-heroic identity” in speaking on behalf of an author who prefigured—even in marginal ways—an antiracist, antimisogynist, or ecocritical sensibility (165). Ryan hopes to put these scholarly impulses at the center of our conversations. What are we looking for, she asks, when we look for admirable qualities in our literary precursors? Sanborn goes further, suggesting that we should focus more closely on reading the author “that we have, not the [one] that we would be most comfortable having” (114). Of course, taking the past on its own terms—or even interrogating why we do not take the past on its own terms—is a methodological choice. Ryan and Sanborn raise fundamental questions about our logic of selection and about why we read the books we do. After all, the nineteenth century was full of plagiarists, from Pauline Hopkins to Thomas Dixon Jr., and the retrospective memory of moral crises changes continually with the passage of time. The selections we make cannot be neutral. In turning our attention to the “moral economies” shaping these selections, Ryan and Sanborn raise significant questions about the unspoken assumptions behind acts of historical recovery. I, for one, am at least open to a reconsideration of our values as readers and of our judgments about the flawed, maddening, confused morality of the authors we choose to read.

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