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Reading the American Renaissance in a Pennsylvania Library

As many scholars have noted in the years since *American Renaissance* was first published, F. O. Matthiessen's claim for a maturing of national culture was deeply rooted in a remarkably local perspective on the nation. Of the five authors Matthiessen celebrated in his book – Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman – the first three were born in Massachusetts and attended New England colleges; Melville was born and died in Manhattan but lived in Massachusetts while writing *Moby-Dick* and much of his short fiction; Whitman, born on Long Island, spent most of his adult life living either in Brooklyn or Camden, New Jersey, though with a brief stint in New Orleans and a much longer one in Washington, DC, Whitman easily had the most southern experience among American Renaissance writers. At the same time, though Poe's aesthetic seriousness attracted Matthiessen's attention, Poe was too southern, and died too early in 1849, to truly share in the Renaissance that the Harvard professor envisioned. The American Renaissance was just as much about a place, and the cultural possibilities associated with that place, as it was about writing or art. And while Matthiessen's account of American literature in the 1850s has proved tenacious in college classrooms and scholarly frameworks across the United States and beyond, the manifestations of that account have necessarily been locally inflected.

To illustrate one localized American Renaissance, I begin this chapter with a brief history of the course that I teach on the period at Lafayette College. The college claims Francis A. March as the nation's first professor of English and March had taught American literature sporadically as early as the 1870s at Lafayette; the college followed the national trend of resisting American literature study at the college level, however, and only two courses on American literature were in the college catalog before World War II, a survey and a topics course.¹ The first American Renaissance course

¹ On Francis March's status as a pioneer of English studies, see Gerald Graff, *Professing*

entered the curriculum in 1947–1948, coinciding with the arrival of William A. Thomas, a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and the first American literature specialist hired by the college. Thomas’s catalog description was as follows:

An intensive study of Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Hawthorne, and Melville: the fulfillment of romanticism and the development of transcendental idealism in the middle of the nineteenth century.²

Matthiessen’s influence is clear, though not total, and the celebratory tone of works such as the Spiller *Literary History of the United States* – which titled the section on the Renaissance authors “Literary Fulfillment” – comes through.³ The addition of the “schoolroom poets,” overwhelmingly popular but increasingly marginalized by academics and literary critics because of their popularity, suggests the uneasy balance Thomas sought to strike between public literary values and academic commitments to aesthetic genius; Whitman’s notable absence also indicated how challenging the poet of the body and of the soul could be in classrooms, even as late as the 1940s.

Over the next several years Thomas brought his course description more in line with the emerging postwar canon: Poe and Whitman were added in 1951, while Longfellow, Holmes, and Lowell were dropped in 1953, leaving Matthiessen’s five plus Poe. Upon Thomas’s retirement in 1967, the description became more thematically neutral, though retaining the same list of authors. Remarkably, in 1977 the catalog reverted back to the celebratory 1953 description, and even as course numberings and curricular models changed over the next thirty years, the description remained until 2008. While it is an open question how representative this account is of the history of American literature courses nationally, two key elements emerge: the tenacity of the concept of an American Renaissance as an originary moment in American literature and the dueling canons of authors that underlie that concept. The latter point is this chapter’s focus, as another local inflection

Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 37–8. On the history of American literature curricula in higher education, see Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For Lafayette College’s 1946 course offerings, see Lafayette College, *College Catalog, 1946–47* (Easton, PA, 1946), 43. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

² Lafayette College, *College Catalog, 1947–49* (Easton, PA, 1947), 79. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

³ See Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby, eds., *Literary History of the United States*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

gives us a new way to look at American literary history in the 1850s: the records of the Easton Library Company (ELC).

Founded in 1811 in the market town of Easton, Pennsylvania, the ELC was a shareholding library, initially funded by the sale of a hundred shares to local residents at \$4 a share, with annual dues of \$2 required to keep up one's membership. Before the Civil War, nearly all American libraries were run either on the shareholding model, run for profit by booksellers (these were generally known as circulating-libraries), or provided as charitable institutions, as church and Sunday school libraries usually were.⁴ As with shareholding libraries such as the Library Company of Philadelphia (LCP), whose example the ELC's founders consciously followed, the library's goal was to provide high-quality reading on a range of topics to those with sufficient interest and leisure to undertake "serious" reading, in areas such as politics, history, philosophy, and science. Yet early on the ELC departed from the LCP's approach by incorporating a significant fiction collection, intended as family entertainment since dependents of shareholders were allowed to check out books on their accounts. Many of Easton's leaders at the time had been educated in Philadelphia, and in a town of a few thousand about sixty miles up the Delaware River from Philadelphia, these men sought to bring some of the metropolis's refinement and cosmopolitan outlook to an area dominated by British and German immigrants.

The library saw increased growth in demand and in its collection size through the 1810s and 1820s, and in 1826 a group of local leaders organized by James Madison Porter called a town meeting to form a college, which opened in 1832 as Lafayette College. Porter and most of the local trustees were charter members of the ELC, and the commitment to reading as cultural and civic improvement was clearly linked to new efforts to improve educational opportunities in the Lehigh valley. Yet connections between the library and the college did not remain close, and by the 1840s, for reasons still not entirely clear, the library began to decline. One response from the board was to make shares available for rental six months at a time

⁴ For an overview of the history of libraries in the nineteenth-century United States, see Kenneth E. Carpenter, "Libraries," in *A History of the Book in America, Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press/American Antiquarian Society, 2010), 273-86; Carpenter, "Libraries," in *A History of the Book in America, Volume 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, ed. Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 303-18. On the history of the ELC and its successor libraries, see Jane S. Moyer, "History of Library Services," in *Two Hundred Years of Life in Northampton County, Pa.* (11 vols., Easton, PA: Northampton County Bicentennial Commission, 1976) 1V:1-18.

for a reduced fee, a policy that made library access available to a wider demographic, particularly women (only three women had their names on the original hundred shares). Another response was to continue offering a steady supply of new fiction and periodicals, which had always dominated the library's borrowing traffic. Even as membership and patron activity continued to decline in the 1850s, demand for novels and magazines, as well as travel writing, biographies, and histories, remained strong.

What kinds of books actually made it onto the ELC's shelves? In the 1810s, large multivolume sets of established authors were some of the first titles acquired and saw frequent use. The works of Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Tobias Smollett defined a canon of favorite authors that was decidedly British and eighteenth-century, if not earlier. These books were largely American reprints, but in the absence of international copyright such works were cheaper for American publishers to produce, and they were known quantities already market-tested for decades.

By the end of the decade, popular novelists such as Maria Edgeworth, Jane and Anna Maria Porter, and Sir Walter Scott had gained a considerable following among ELC patrons, and in the 1820s they met their first serious American competition in the dual phenomenon of Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Irving's *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, where the iconic stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" first appeared, was the hit of the decade, followed by Cooper's Revolution-era adventure novel *The Spy* and the various novels of wilderness and sea adventures that made Cooper the first American author to live entirely from the proceeds of his writing.⁵ Catharine Maria Sedgwick's novels of manners and historical drama were close behind Cooper's and Irving's works in popularity. Beyond fiction, biographies of American figures such as George Washington shared shelf space with the rapidly growing cottage industry of memoirs of Napoleon, and accounts of explorations and travel around the globe gave Easton readers a window into a world that stretched far beyond Pennsylvania.

By the 1850s, Irving was less a sensation than he had been a generation earlier, but Cooper's popularity was still uncontested, and the ELC's acquisition of Stringer and Townsend's thirty-one-volume edition of Cooper's *Novels* seems to have shored up both supply and demand. Alongside

⁵ For more detailed analysis of the reception of Irving and Cooper and their contemporaries in the ELC, see Christopher N. Phillips, "Reading on the Edge of the Atlantic: The Easton Library Company," in *Before the Public Library: Reading, Community, and Identity in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850*, ed. Mark Towsey and Kyle B. Roberts (Boston: Brill, 2018), 284-301.

Cooper was the long array of Harper Select Novels, a bargain series begun by New York's Harper & Brothers firm in 1842 that consisted exclusively of single-volume editions of European novels.⁶ A great number of titles by adventure writers such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Charles Kingsley, and G. P. R. James came to the ELC as part of this series, as well as works such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Continental authors including Frederika Bremer, Alexandre Dumas, Eugène Sue, and Karl Spindler also found places on the ELC's shelves and in patrons' accounts. Dickens's novels did well at the ELC, and Scott remained popular in the 1850s.

These European luminaries were joined by American writers, though not largely from Matthiessen's list. Novelists such as John Pendleton Kennedy and Robert Montgomery Bird gained popularity in the 1830s, followed by the rise of American sentimentalist writers Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Maria Susanna Cummins in the 1850s. William H. Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, Jared Sparks's biographies of Washington and Franklin, and Irving's historical accounts *Astoria* and *Mahomet and His Successors* were some of the most popular nonfiction works, and the library also acquired the first two volumes of John James Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, the five-volume companion work to his more famous *Birds of North America* picture series. Audubon's works stood alongside Alexander von Humboldt's, whose travel accounts as well as his monument of ecological thought *Cosmos* made him the ELC's most popular science writer. Josiah Clark Nott's *Types of Mankind*, which notoriously arrayed illustrations and ethnographic accounts to argue for the inferiority of non-Caucasian races, was also added to the collection and received mild interest from ELC readers. The American Renaissance – which of course would not be named that until almost a century after the fact – was represented by Emerson's *Representative Men* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. Hawthorne's most popular work in the ELC, his two-volume *Twice-Told Tales*, was published in 1837 and 1842, well before the 1850–1855 era that Matthiessen emphasized. No books by Thoreau, Melville, or Whitman ever appeared on the ELC's shelves.

That does not mean, however, that Thoreau and Melville were not present in the library. The ELC's most popular magazines in the 1840s and 1850s were the *Eclectic Magazine* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The latter was a British publication, edited and published by William Blackwood, and was known for its feisty Tory politics; the former was a New York-based

⁶ Eugene Exman, *The House of Harper: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Publishing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 26.

magazine that drew exclusively from European sources. Their new challengers in the 1850s were *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, which offered a mix of European and American materials (including advance extracts from *Moby-Dick*), and *Putnam's Monthly*, a journal that focused exclusively on new American works and serialized writings by Melville and Thoreau. Part of the irony of *Putnam's* mission to promote American originality was that the editor kept a policy of leaving bylines out, meaning that readers could enjoy reading Melville and Thoreau without ever knowing whose works they had read. Magazines were highly popular at the ELC, often the most-borrowed titles in a given timespan, and the collection of magazines at the library indicate a continued interest in the best European literature alongside a growing interest in American offerings.

But just how can we know how popular these works were? The previous paragraph focused on acquisitions, which were shaped by shareholder requests but ultimately in the hands of the ELC's board of directors. The board's control over materials meant that they could respond to demand but also attempt to guide shareholders' tastes by choosing what they deemed worthy titles for the collection. What happened after the books and magazines went on the shelves comes into focus through the ELC's loan ledgers, which remarkably have survived intact from the library's opening day in 1811 to 1862, when the library ceased operating as an independent corporation. Using the loan records for Matthiessen's favored dates, 1850–1855, what follows is an essay in what Matthew Brown calls “reader-based literary history,”⁷ an attempt to understand the literary culture of the 1850s not through what new works authors produced but through what readers actually took off the shelves. It is worth pointing out that in the case of library records, the loan of a book does not necessarily equal reading; as today, many readers in the ELC tried and failed to get through a book, and at times reading cover-to-cover was not even the goal. Library borrowings can be taken as a sign of a what I call *aspirational reading*, the awareness of and interest in a given book built to the level that would lead an individual to select this book, and not that one (at least this time), to try out.

It is also worth mentioning that, while I have been at work with a team of librarians and students to transcribe these records into a publicly accessible database, the records for the 1850s have been digitized as images but not transcribed.⁸ My analysis here is based on a visual count from the two

⁷ See Matthew P. Brown, *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁸ Scanned images for all the ledgers, and borrowing record transcriptions up to about 1830, are available at Christopher N. Phillips, *The Easton Library Company Database Project*, <http://elc.lafayette.edu/>.

loan ledgers covering the relevant years, and the counts are not as precise nor as contextualized as they would be as transcribed data in an electronic format. This analysis, while informed by digital humanities methods, thus reflects both older scholarly traditions of bibliography and library history and the material realities of the digital humanities – namely, that collaboration, project design, training, transcription, and analysis all take considerable investments of time and resources, and the work is thus much, much slower than the computation made possible by the painstaking creation of the data set and interface. The needs of digital scholarship, like all other forms of scholarship, share in the list of requisites Ishmael gives for writing: “Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience.”⁹

Let us begin with Hawthorne. As the most-acquired and the most-read Matthiessen author in the ELC, Hawthorne saw his greatest success as a writer of short stories. This is not a great surprise, given Hawthorne’s decades of work in that form beginning in the 1820s, which involved his stories’ publication in magazines, gift books, and even newspapers across the United States. Even his *Scarlet Letter*, his first and today his most famous novel, began as a new collection of short stories and changed direction only after his publisher, James Fields, suggested that he expand his “Custom House” sketch into a book. *Scarlet Letter* and the next novel, *House of the Seven Gables*, combined for sixty-eight loans, with the latter book receiving a few more total loans (thirty-seven to thirty-one). *Twice-Told Tales*, Hawthorne’s first book from a decade earlier, was borrowed fifty-one times, in one or both volumes, giving Hawthorne a grand total of 119 loans. By contrast, Emerson’s *Representative Men* received a mere nine loans over the same period, indicating that philosophical reflection was much more palatable for ELC readers in a fictional form such as Hawthorne used. Hawthorne also seemed to be part of a new rising generation of popular authors; Sedgwick’s four novels were borrowed seventy-three times in the same period, Irving’s imaginative works had only thirty-three loans. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had twenty loans, Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* fifteen, and Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, an evangelical novel that epitomized for Hawthorne the productions of “scribbling women” with whom he found himself competing, had twenty-eight. Yet, while Hawthorne certainly enjoyed some popularity, it would be a stretch to grant him bestseller (or best-loaner?) status at the ELC. In the same period, Maryland writer John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* left the shelves forty-seven times, while *Wuthering Heights*

⁹ Herman Melville, in *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, *Writings of Herman Melville* 6 (Evanston/Chicago: Northwestern University Press/Newberry Library, 1988), 145.

was close behind with forty-five loans. Kennedy's novel portrayed an idyllic lifestyle in the grand plantation houses of antebellum Virginia – something of a pre-war *Gone With the Wind* – while Brontë's book offered a dramatic love story on the wild, windswept heaths of northern England. While it would be difficult to say whether these landscapes captured the imaginations of ELC readers more effectively than Hawthorne's New England locales, it is fair to say that Massachusetts, in either colonial or modern dress, did not dominate Easton's literary imagination.

Beyond these works, Walter Scott still loomed large, with a total 151 loans among over a dozen titles, including *Waverly*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, and the *Tales of My Grandfather* series. Among the magazines, *Blackwood's* had a comparable 152 loans, while *Harper's* had 133 and *Putnam's* 104. But the clear favorites during the 1850s were the *Eclectic*, whose 376 loans topped its two nearest rival magazines combined, and Cooper's novels, with an astonishing 512 loans. Certainly, Cooper had quantity in his favor; the ELC had steadily acquired his novels as they appeared across the decades, and the Stringer and Townsend collected edition provided handy single-volume copies for Cooper fans. And "fan" is the appropriate word for a number of ELC patrons, whose interest in Cooper seems to have bordered on addiction at times. Easton newspaper publisher J. P. Hetrich tore through eight Cooper novels, primarily the Leather-Stocking novels and sea novels, in the summer of 1854. The following summer, merchant John Micke borrowed seven volumes of the collected edition in a row, favoring novels with Native American themes. Hiram Baldwin, one of the ELC's renters, had a similar streak of seven consecutive Cooper loans in the summer of 1854, with several more over the spring and summer of 1855, interspersed with selections from the works of Scott, Dickens, Kennedy, and South Carolina writer William Gilmore Simms, whose novels retained some of their earlier popularity with forty loans across a half-dozen titles in the early 1850s.¹⁰ Following Jeffrey Walker's suggestion in this book's next chapter, the timing of these Cooper binges may reflect the presence of young readers in the home, particularly boys, filling their summer vacation by chain-reading adventure novels. Whoever the Cooper readers were in these homes, however, the loan ledgers make clear that the novelist provided, in great quantities, the kind of reading experience that ELC patrons craved.

One last element in the ELC's loan records discussed here raises anew the questions: what was different about the American Renaissance, and when

¹⁰ Easton Library Company, *Shareholder and Borrowing Registers*, 5 vols., Records and Documents of the Easton Library Company, Easton Area Public Library, Easton, PA, 1V:175, V:155, V:202. Scans for these records are available at <http://elc.lafayette.edu/>.

did the shift occur? The records for January 1850 to fall 1854 appear in the library's fourth ledger, while those for late 1854 and 1855 appear in the fifth and final ledger, and my visual count in those ledgers allowed for separate totals for each ledger. Two trends in the fifth ledger, while not conclusive, are quite intriguing. First, among the magazines, nearly all the *Eclectic* and *Blackwood* loans appeared in the fourth ledger; *Harper's* and *Putnam's*, on the other hand, saw very few loans in the fourth, with increases by orders of magnitude in the fifth.¹¹ Other popular titles, like the novels of Cooper and Scott, remained strong in the fifth ledger, each garnering at least 40 percent of their six-year totals in the final sixteen months, so a general decline in loans does not explain why *Eclectic* and *Blackwood* suddenly lost so much popularity. Was Easton finally beginning a new surge of interest in the latest American writing?

The second trend involves Hawthorne and the sentimental writers he resented. Of Hawthorne's 119 loans, 104 were in the fourth ledger; in the fifth, *Seven Gables* was borrowed fourteen times and *Twice-Told Tales* only once, while *Scarlet Letter* sat idle on the shelf. Fanny Fern's two series of *Fern Leaves* (her collected newspaper columns), as well as her novel *Ruth Hall*, combined for a mere twenty-six loans in the fourth ledger, but those titles plus her new *Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern* combined for forty-seven in the fifth. Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* and *Queechy* were borrowed only three times in the fourth ledger, but combined for fifty-one, the total number of loans for Hawthorne's most popular book, in the fifth. Similar surges of interest appeared in the fifth volume around Cummins's *Lamplighter*, and even actor-playwright Anna Cora Mowatt's new memoir, *Autobiography of an Actress*, outperformed Hawthorne's combined total in the fifth ledger. If 1855 was a pivot point in the relative popularity of American magazine writing, it also seems to have been a moment of rising interest in women's sentimental writing alongside declining demand for Hawthorne's penchant for darkness and ambiguity. Yet Rufus Griswold's four-volume edition of Poe's works entered the ELC's collection later in the 1850s, and without contextualizing data from the rest of the 1850s and 1860s, it is difficult to know how important these mid-decade shifts were in the ELC's history. The data do suggest, however, that the year Hawthorne wrote his (in)famous "scribbling women" letter to James Fields was a moment in which it did seem that his relative standing among the most successful women writers

¹¹ Ledger 4 totals for these magazines: *Eclectic*, 323; *Blackwood's*, 139; *Harper's*, 29; *Putnam's*, 12. Ledger 5 totals: *Harper's*, 104; *Putnam's*, 92; *Eclectic*, 53; *Blackwood's*, 13. Part of the explanation for the very low Ledger 4 total for *Putnam's* is the fact that the magazine began publication in 1853.

was open to question (if he worried during this time about the continued popularity of Cooper or Kennedy, he never said so).

The Civil War was the final nail in the declining ELC's coffin, as shareholders stopped paying dues while their attention and finances were called elsewhere. But the board did not want to see the library, with its own building and a collection of thousands of volumes – the largest in the Lehigh valley – simply disappear. Easton's first high school had recently opened across the street from the library, and an agreement in 1862 kept the ELC's doors open through support from the high school, in exchange for the students having access to the books one day a week. This arrangement continued for some thirty years, and among the few new acquisitions indicated in a late-century shelflist were copies of *Walden* and Emerson's *Essays*; apparently, Whitman was still too controversial, particularly for adolescent readers. The organization of the present-day Easton Area Public Library in 1903 brought a grand new Carnegie-funded building sited on a hill facing Lafayette College and the library's first professional director, Henry Marx. Marx was committed to preserving local history as part of the library's mission, and he carefully preserved the ELC's records and what remained of its original collection, one-sixth of which still survives today in the library's local history room named for him. What does not survive, however, is the considerable fiction collection. As the story has come down through library staff, Marx shared the belief that many of his colleagues at the American Library Association expressed that fiction, particularly popular and dated fiction, had no place in an institution committed to cultural uplift.¹² Heavily worn copies of Cooper's *Chainbearer* and Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* are the sole survivors of a collection that once brought the latest, and for their purposes the greatest, literature to the culturally eclectic shareholders of the ELC.

The kind of evidence provided by the ELC loan ledgers is scarce in the pre-war period, as records routinely disappeared due to poor storage, damage from elements or pests, or simply a need for the space the records took up. More records are coming to light in the wake of digital methods providing new ways to gather, analyze, and present these nineteenth-century databases, and without comparison with other libraries' loan activity, it is difficult to say how representative the ELC was of national trends. Yet the reading patterns of this library bear a certain resemblance to what we know the writers of the American Renaissance read, enjoyed, and emulated. Cooper, Irving,

¹² Frank Felsenstein and James J. Connolly discuss similar tensions between librarians and patrons over the value of fiction in the Muncie Public Library; see *What Middletown Read: Print Culture in an American Small City* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015).

and Scott loomed large for Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Stowe, and Warner, among many others. In a review of Putnam's revised edition of Cooper's pirate novel *The Red Rover*, Melville paused from writing *Moby-Dick* to remark: "Long ago, and far inland, we read it in our uncritical days, and enjoyed it as much as thousands of the rising generation will." Melville in fact said little about the contents of the book in his review, focusing instead on his ideal book cover, dominated by a pirate flag, for the title; he could safely assume that the readers of the *Literary World*, where Melville's review appeared, would know Cooper's 1827 novel as well as he did.¹³ The American Renaissance writers also knew Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, Humboldt's *Cosmos*, as well as the popular British novelists and poets. David Reynolds in his *Beneath the American Renaissance* demonstrated they also read widely in the popular print culture of the day, including periodicals, pamphlets, and cheap books focused on entertainment or reform politics that library boards like the ELC's generally did not deem serious enough to acquire for their collections.

Much more work needs to be done on the behavior of readers, or in this case borrowers, to fill in this hastily sketched picture of what the American Renaissance looked like to a public who lived through it. But if these preliminary findings from a small county seat in Pennsylvania are any indication of national trends, we might say the following: not only British writers but American writers from multiple regions drew at least as much readerly attention as those in Matthiessen's canon did; both books and magazines were key to driving popular taste, and the rise of new American-focused literary magazines may have begun to offset the dominance of cheap reprints of European works, at least among more affluent readers and institutions; and new interest in American women's writing built alongside a long-lived interest in the productions of earlier writers, even those before the nineteenth century, from Pope to Goldsmith to Shakespeare. And while in hindsight we might see the stirrings of a new era in the reception of American literature in the 1850s, that new era was complicated, variegated, and marked as much by continuity as by change. If we were to travel back in time and tell Matthiessen's favored authors that they were part of a powerful new movement that would be called the American Renaissance, they might believe us. But if we were to tell the mid-century patrons of the ELC the same thing, we would be fortunate to only receive polite skepticism in return.

¹³ Herman Melville, "A Thought on Book-Binding," *Literary World* 6 (March 16, 1850): 276-7.