A Brief Reception History of Poe's Brief Writing Career

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Edgar Allen Poe's reception history is one of peculiar detail, largely due to the fact that the vast majority of his work never actually garnered reception during his lifetime. Despite a notable career as a self-proclaimed "magazinist" (Allen 186) and the surprise success of his now-traditional "The Raven," Poe never saw recognition for his poetry or his prose. The attention he did receive was strewn with contradiction; critics and writers, both before and after his death, held strong opinions on opposite ends of the spectrum. Mark Twain pegged him "unreadable," while Yeats believed him to be "the greatest of American poets. (Asselineau 5)" An editorial by James E. Heath of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1839 contended that Poe's "tales of the wild, improbable and terrible class, [could never] be permanently popular in [the United States]. (qtd. in Walker 110)" John Frost of the *Philadelphia Weekly Messenger*, on the other hand, touted "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a "noble and imposing tale…[which could have been] drawn only by a master-hand. (qtd. in Walker 118)" Regardless of the critical discord sparked by Poe's work, the chronology of his brief writing career (and life) is quite telling, and as equally intriguing as his work.

In 1827, a young Poe took publishing matters into his own hands, so to speak, by self-publishing his first collection of poetry. Titled *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, the volume went virtually unnoticed as self-published work rarely, even to this day, results in critical or commercial reception. Despite the lack of recognition for *Tamerlane*, an undiscouraged Poe followed up his debut with a second volume of poetry in 1829. *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*, also self-published, suffered the same fate as his initial literary outing. In 1831, Poe published a second edition to his sophomore effort; though this collection emulated the failure of the first two, it would include such contemporary staples as “Lenore” and “To Helen.”

Poe subsequently began writing a wealth of short stories, many of which he submitted to fiction contests. He often submitted multiple works at once and, in 1833, he was awarded first prize for “MS Found in a Bottle.” This moment was considered Poe’s first official literary reception. Poe walked away from the contest not only with an award, but also with a new friend and connection. John P. Kennedy, a wealthy lawyer and amateur writer, served as one of the contest’s judges. He was so impressed with Poe that he played a major role in landing him the position of assistant editor at the *Southern Literary Messenger*. It was Poe’s tireless and prolific work as both an editor and critic of the *Messenger* that brought him some long-awaited acknowledgement. However, Poe’s yearning for distinction as a fiction writer remained strong.

In 1840, Poe found an official publisher for *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, a complete collection of his short fiction up to that point. The book, considered two volumes with respect to its title, was fairly well-received by critics. A consistent pattern seemed to emerge from the press: Poe’s tales, though evident of some literary worth, contained subject matter heavy on sadistic human impulse and seemingly devoid of morality, which, of course, was simply not for everyone. “The images are dim but distinct; shadowy but well-defined… his genius puts us in mind of that of Coleridge, (qtd. in Walker 117)” wrote Judge Beverly Tucker. Similarly, Joseph Clay Neil, in a

Pennsylvanian notice, commented that "the reader, in whatever mood he may be, cannot fail to find something to suit his interest and absorb his attention. (qtd. in Walker 122)" Some critics, however, were unwilling to find any redeeming value in the work, as an unsigned notice in the *Boston Morning Post* displays: "A greater amount of trash within the same compass it would be difficult to find. (qtd. in Walker 236)"

Though the contrary critical dialogue that *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* spurred certainly offered some vindication in terms of Poe's literary credibility, the commercial angle of the book was as grim as its tales. *Tales* suffered from slow sales and, though a dispute exists over whether 750 or 1,750 copies were printed for publication, the correct figure still would have been far below the 5,000 copies which deemed a book a bestseller. Poe, perhaps revealing his stance on writing as a commodity, was quoted as saying, "I have written no books and have been so far essentially a Magazinist. (Allen 186)" Clearly, Poe *had* in fact been officially published. However, literary status was very much equated with sales success (again, a contemporary truth), and Poe himself recognized it as such. In fact, the labeling of himself as a magazinist in a derogatory manner further explains some ambiguous comments made four years earlier by Poe, regarding his work as "*intended* for half-banter, half-satire (Asselineau 16)," and supports Poe's later commentary (circa 1843), which spoke of horror tales with surprising skepticism. One might interpret these radically unexpected sentiments two ways: Poe was perhaps merely trying to take ownership or credit for the very things that critics and readers disliked in order to save face, or he truly was attempting to buy into a narrative formula that he felt would yield successful results (nay lucrative results).

Though Poe went on to receive substantial commercial success with “The Raven,” a chillingly morose yet rhythmically playful poem, he certainly was not known as a fiction writer during his lifetime. He was an incredibly ambitious man, though his motives remain unclear. Was Poe a genuine scribe of poetry and prose? Or was he simply subscribing to a writing school which he hoped would hurl him into literary notoriety? The latter would have implications of ingenuity that could potentially color one’s reading of his work as legitimate in its canonical status, while the former could further perpetuate one’s view of Poe as a misunderstood and unjustly chastised contributor to classic literature. Regardless of artistic or commercial intention, the reception (or lack thereof) history of Edgar Allen Poe remains a fascinating trove to uncover.

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