

# When Readers Become Fans: Nineteenth-Century American Poetry as a Fan Activity

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## Poetry Fans

In his autobiography *Random Memories* (1922), Ernest Longfellow recounted life with his famous father, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Ernest was a painter of modest reputation, and he filled his memoir with stories about the overseas travels that had played such an important role in his art. But to most readers, the memoir's real appeal was its portrait of life inside Craigie House, the Cambridge mansion the Longfellow family had owned since 1843. Ernest devotes special attention to his father's acquaintances, treating readers to brief, at times amusing, sketches of his many prominent visitors. We learn about such steadfast family friends as Charles Sumner, Louis Agassiz, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. We learn about visits from the Prince of Wales, the Hungarian revolutionary Lajos Kossuth, and the violinist Ole Bull. Ernest pays tribute to the actress Fanny Kemble and fondly recalls her compassion when as a boy he suffered from a stomachache.

Not all of the portraits are admiring. Anthony Trollope comes off as tedious, loud-mouthed, and boastful. The humorist Bret Harte seemed so lost and disoriented that Ernest had to guide him back to his hotel. Considered to be among the closest of Longfellow's friends, James Russell Lowell was capable of being extraordinarily gauche and inexplicably snubbed the family after Henry's death.

Not only was the actress Sarah Bernhardt a guest, Ernest tells us, but she was rumored to have kissed his widowed father during her visit (E. Longfellow 20-47).

But whatever ambivalence the son felt about these celebrity friends, Ernest was far more impatient with the demands that public life made on his father. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow experienced celebrity like no other American writer before Mark Twain. By 1857, he had sold a staggering 326,258 books, a figure that would grow dramatically in the next decades (Calhoun 198-99). Even more significantly, however, Longfellow's works were known among large segments of the population that traditionally would not have considered buying a book of verse. His poems were memorized, imitated, and parodied until they became part of the culture at large. The Hutchinson Family singers turned Longfellow's poem "Excelsior" into one of their most rousing and popular anthems. The circus performer Dan Rice named his trick horse after the poem in a bid to capture a middle-class audience (Carlyon 237-39). After the Civil War, "Excelsior" would become a staple of schoolroom recitations and appear in advertisements for everything from a New York insurance company to a Massachusetts clothing store (Sorby 1-34; Irmscher 61-66).<sup>1</sup> There were beautiful, illustrated copies of *Evangeline* and touring theater groups that performed *The Song of Hiawatha* in native costume.

As Ernest reminds us, Longfellow was one of the United States' leading citizens, a poet whose reputation and accomplishments made him a favorite among other notables and celebrities. What particularly interests me, however, is the considerable power Longfellow's fame exerted over private individuals. Amid the visits from glittering actresses and princes, the poet inspired thousands of men and women who thought of him with such enthusiasm that they believed his fame granted them a kind of personal accessibility. By the end of his life, Longfellow had received letters from over 6,200 correspondents, a number that does not include the more than 1,300 requests for autographs (Irmscher 24). With a combination of responsibility and resignation, he shouldered this fame stoically. He seems to have written a personal response to every request that came to him, a generosity, one friend believed, that contributed to his death (Irmscher 24, 36).<sup>2</sup> Longfellow was hardly an intimate poet, and on at least one occasion he withheld a poem from publication because he deemed it too revealing (Calhoun 230). And yet, thousands of people wanted to connect with Longfellow personally, as if his fame were less the stature granted to a gifted individual than the web of relationships he owed to his followers. Longfellow's fame highlights the puzzling intersection between poetry and fandom in the middle of the nineteenth century.

We tend to regard nineteenth-century celebrity as a largely public phenomenon, one that involved the gathering of crowds and the performance of personality. There is ample material to warrant such a belief—from Edwin Forrest triumphantly appearing as the Indian warrior Metamora to the delight of his working-class admirers to Adah Isaacs Menken scandalizing male and female audiences with her exotic sexuality in *Mazeppa*.<sup>3</sup> But amid all the accounts of Jenny Lind, Bayard Taylor, and Henry Ward Beecher, Ernest's anecdotes remind

us that the culture of celebrity emerged as a domestic phenomenon as well, one that stretched into the parlors, libraries, and diaries of the middle class home.<sup>4</sup> In nineteenth-century poetry, scholars have an especially good subject for shifting their attention from the collective experience of fame to its personal impact. Crossing the threshold between public and private life, poetry allows us to see the rise of celebrity as a cumulative process, a singular achievement that thousands of dispersed individuals bestowed on poets both together and apart.

Richard Schickel has used the term “intimate stranger” to characterize the personal relationship fans think they have with stars. According to Schickel, celebrities and their handlers cultivate an “illusion of intimacy,” for they see it as being crucial to maintaining a following (4). To those of us accustomed to this illusion of intimacy in its innumerable twenty-first century forms, Ernest’s stories tend to have a familiar trajectory. In their subtle, strategic way, they open the doors to Craigie House and raise the window shades. The son hears about Bernhardt’s stolen kiss and commits it to memory, to the site at which cultural gossip overlaps with family history. He tells the tale from the heights of Parnasus for a public eager to know how the gods and muses behave.

But what of the hundreds of strangers who contacted Longfellow directly, the men and women who wanted to connect the private man with the poet on the page? These men and women played a major role in creating nineteenth-century literary celebrity. In recent years scholars such as Thomas Baker and Charles Ponce de Leon have suggested that the construction of intimacy was vital to the growth of nineteenth-century celebrity culture, for it was intimacy that reading audiences especially liked to consume (Baker 44-45; Ponce de Leon 29-34). Longfellow’s fans not only welcomed the intimacy they found in newspapers, magazines, novels, memoirs, and poems, but they performed that intimacy as well. Although more commonly associated with individualism, celebrity is, as Longfellow’s followers demonstrate, a collaborative form of identity, one that resides with fans as much as it does unique personalities.

I want to use this essay to reflect on the questions and, indeed, opportunities that nineteenth-century poetry fans raise for scholars of literature, cultural studies, and media. The most prominent scholars of fandom have traditionally avoided literary topics in their quest to elevate popular culture. Committed to reversing what many regard as “invidious cultural hierarchies,” they have focused on the fan communities surrounding television shows, movies, and popular music (Pearson 99-100). Scholars such as Cornel Sandvoss have demonstrated the ways in which fan studies can benefit from literary theory, but there is still widespread belief that literary readers are so immersed in systems of privilege and aesthetic value that they would largely be irrelevant to cultural studies. However, as Lawrence Levine explained nearly two decades ago, many nineteenth-century Americans viewed literature as part of popular culture rather than the refuge of the elite.<sup>5</sup> This was particularly the case for poetry, which readers encountered in advertisements, newspapers, broadsides, commercial pamphlets, and magazines. Poetry played a prominent role in middle-class life, and publishers worked to

market their books to a wide range of consumers. In 1878, for example, a reader could purchase a book of Longfellow's poems for as little as fifteen cents or as much as ten dollars (Irmscher 57). Poetry's ability to express class aspirations, self-reflection, and pious domesticity helped extend it deep into the population, producing followers for such poets as Martin Tupper and Lydia Sigourney.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth-century United States, poetry was an extraordinarily pervasive cultural form, one that could include elements of artistry, spiritualism, promotion, humor, history, melodrama, socio-political commentary, and entertainment.

Thinking about readers as fans is equally valuable to the task of developing a social history of poetry.<sup>7</sup> Yopie Prins has challenged scholars to develop an historical poetics that examines how cultures have perceived genre across an array of time periods. Rather than assuming that genres are transhistorical, transcultural phenomena, she urges us to recognize their "cultural specificity." The history of genre occurs alongside "shifts in the production and circulation of poetry" so that, for example, our conceptions of both "the lyric" and prosody are embedded in material history (Prins 233-34). I want to take Prins' challenge in a different direction by arguing that the rise of celebrity and fandom in the antebellum United States created an important shift in the culture of nineteenth-century poetry. Such a view requires us to expand our inquiries beyond the production, distribution, and theorizing of poems to acknowledge the myriad ways in which poetry was consumed. As publishers began to realize the commercial power of fame, they increasingly emphasized an author's background and personality. One consequence of this development was that learning about poets and reading poetry could take place under the sign of celebrity. My discussion explores a small but fascinating subset of individuals who claimed such intimacy with the poets who attracted them that they breached the conventional distance separating public figures from their fans.

Longfellow was especially vulnerable to encroachments on his privacy, and as his son's memoir tells us, countless visitors came to greet the poet at his Cambridge home. Craigie House had been the former headquarters of General Washington during the Revolutionary War, and Longfellow was deemed a worthy keeper of that heritage, a poet who had the gravitas of a national institution. Pictures and engravings of Craigie House appeared in books, magazines, and calendars throughout the country (Irmscher 44). People thought they knew Longfellow because he was famous, and they felt a claim upon his home because it was in effect a national monument. Longfellow found so many visitors on his doorstep that he began to keep a box of pre-signed autographs on the mantelpiece.

As Ernest reflected years later, however, some callers expected more than a signature. "Every person of prominence has queer experiences with cranks and otherwise unintentionally humorous persons. My father was no exception, and indeed suffered more than others, because of his kindness of heart" (E. Longfellow 81). Ernest describes the "rustic" newlyweds who showed up one afternoon and asked for a tour of his study (82). He tells a story about a gigantic Russian (who turned out to be the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin) who arrived for a visit,

accepted an invitation to lunch, and then stayed past eleven that night (82-83). Longfellow had been famously widowed when his wife's dress caught fire in 1861, and the tragedy became part of his public identity. With good humor, Ernest recounts the story of "the crazy woman" who arrived at Craigie House "with all her baggage and announced that she was married" to the poet and "had come to stay." The woman was so insistent that she was Longfellow's wife that the police had to remove her forcibly (84).



**Figure 1:** The entryway to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Craigie House with a view towards the parlor. Note the prominent bust of George Washington. 1910-1920. Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. LC-D4-73274.

It would be easy to dismiss this woman on the basis of pathology and return her to the single paragraph she receives in Ernest's book. But her presence in Longfellow's hallway, her stubborn conviction that she belongs, insists that we regard her as more than an amusing footnote to literary history. She serves as an emissary from an obscure collection of nineteenth-century women who identified so intensively with Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and Edgar Allan Poe that their responses seem downright bizarre. And yet these responses, at once crazed and devotional, literal and profound, can help us consider how the imagined intimacies of fandom developed alongside—and at times in concert with—mid-century attitudes towards poets and poetry. In recent years, scholars have shown how nineteenth-century poetry encouraged readers to cross class and spatial boundaries, how it helped them navigate issues of sexuality, psychology, nationalism, politics, race, sympathy, mortality, and faith.<sup>8</sup> But of all the public and private thresholds this woman must have crossed on her journey to the halls of Craigie House, perhaps the most momentous was the one separating those who are famous from those who are not. Laden with baggage and personal effects, the faux Mrs. Longfellow impels us to consider the shared histories of nineteenth-century fandom and poetry.

In the pages that follow, I explore three instances of fandom in the lives of Longfellow, Whitman, and Poe, and with them, three distinct versions of intimacy. Whitman and Poe tell us that the emergence of celebrity in the antebellum United States allowed the reading of poetry to become a fan activity. Rather than culminate in a comprehensive thesis or explanatory narrative, this essay explores the benefits of thinking about fandom as a way of reading, a way of approaching both the poem and the institution of poetry with intensive personal urgency. One of the pleasures of working with the history of fandom is the complicated evidence it can yield, and scholars might best address this evidence with a range of critical perspectives and theories. Turning to Whitman, the next section asks whether fandom itself provided a model for how to value and read poetry.

### **Performing Whitman's Intimacy**

Longfellow was not unique in attracting admirers who transgressed the boundary separating them from stars. Celebrities and their followers have what psychologists describe as a parasocial relationship. Fans may feel that they "know" a star, but they almost always comprehend that that relation exists outside of any social context. Although they may fantasize about such encounters, they rarely expect to be recognized themselves. In the middle of the nineteenth century, observers were stymied by the men and women who presumed to breach this divide. Jenny Lind's American tour was threatened by overeager admirers who intruded into her hotel room (Willis 231-33). Lydia Sigourney received roughly two thousand letters a year from admirers asking for literary favors and souvenirs (Sigourney 377). In *Letters of Life* (1868), Sigourney surveys some of the more outrageous requests: a poem written for a Maine couple to be read



at their wedding, an elegy for a boy who “drowned in a barrel of swine’s food,” a poem on the “dog-star Sirius,” and an elegy for an underfed canary (369, 370, 373). By insisting upon their connection to figures such as Sigourney and Lind, fans claimed the right to be recognized, to turn the illusory intimacy at the heart of celebrity culture into a substantially personal bond.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2:** Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney. 1855-1865. Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. LC-DIG-cwpbh-02747.

This historical context is important in understanding Walt Whitman's efforts to address his audience with intense familiarity. Depicting them as lovers and *camerados* (Whitman's word for comrades), the poet proclaimed that he himself would cure readers of their social estrangement. He was at once responding to the beginnings of celebrity culture and anticipating an illusion that would become one of its most fundamental conventions. Some readers, however, confused the poetic expression of intimacy with the thing itself. After reading the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a Hartford woman named Susan Garnet Smith wrote Whitman a highly erotic fan letter in which she offered to bear him a child:

Know Walt Whitman that I am a woman! I am not beautiful, but I love you! I am thirty-two years old. I am one of the workers of the world. A friend carefully lends me *Leaves of Grass* for a day. Stealing an hour from labor I take it out for a walk. I do not know what I carry in my arms pressed close to my side and bosom! I feel a strange new sympathy! A mysterious delicious thrill! It is the loving contact of an affinite soul blending harmoniously with mine. I begin to know Walt Whitman.

Know Walt Whitman that thou hast a child for me! A noble beautiful perfect manchild. I charge you my love not to give it to another woman. The world demands it! It is not for you and me, is our child, but for the world. My womb is clean and pure. It is ready for thy child my love. . . . Our boy my love! Do you not already love him? He must be begotten on a mountain top, in the open air. Not in lust, not in mere gratification of sensual passion, but in holy ennobling pure strong deep glorious passionate broad universal love. (Traubel 312-314)

Whitman was shocked by the letter and wrote "Insane Asylum" on the envelope. Nearly thirty years later, the presumption of Smith's letter still bothered him. "Isn't it crazy?" Whitman asked his friend, Horace Traubel. "No," Traubel responded, "it's *Leaves of Grass*" (Traubel 313).

Traubel keenly understood the promise that Whitman made to his readers. The poet had developed an especially hybrid sense of address, one that encouraged a public of individuals to read him personally. Smith had taken the poet at his word, responding to *Leaves of Grass* with exuberance and zeal. Her desire to bear Whitman's child seems a natural, though forward, response to a poet who routinely described himself in erotic terms. In "Song of Myself," Whitman had boasted of his power to jet "the stuff" of future republics (*Complete* 73). He had proclaimed that the American poet would "plunge his semitic muscle" into the United States (*Complete* 23). "Come closer to me, / Push close my lovers and take the best I possess," he commanded readers in what would eventually be titled "A Song for Occupations." "Yield closer and closer, and give me the best you possess" (*LG 1860* 143). The erotic metaphors urge us to regard *Leaves of*



*Grass* as a man, not a book, insisting that we perform the intimacy they suggest. Smith transformed Whitman's affective sexuality, seeing it not as a metaphor for reading but as a promised sexual act. Her letter associates poetry with the dissolving of rules and boundaries: she steals an hour from work, she wants to conceive the poet's child, she hopes to blend with the poet's soul. Her fandom challenges the distinctions between author, audience, and text.

Smith's desire to make love to Whitman on a mountaintop extended the vision he offered readers in the poem he would later title "Whoever You Are, Holding Me Now in Hand":

But just possibly with you on a high hill—first watching lest any  
 person, for miles around, approach unawares,  
 Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea, or  
 some quiet island,  
 Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,  
 With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss, or the new husband's kiss,  
 For I am the new husband, and I am the new comrade.<sup>10</sup> (1860 345)

Building off the familiar book/body trope that he had used in earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman encouraged his audience to read him personally—to allow him to cross the threshold from public poet to husband and friend. After providing the textual foreplay, however, he shrank from the invitation to complete the sexual act.

The ardency of Smith's response had even deeper textual roots than Whitman's promise of a hilltop kiss. "Whoever You Are" is typical of the Calamus cluster in its portrait of an audience burning to know the poet's secrets.<sup>11</sup> The poet describes his readers as "novitiates," warning them that their path to find him is so "long and exhausting" that they have little chance of reaching their goal (1860 345). The poem suggests that to read Whitman is to pursue him, to follow him avidly, even fruitlessly, with little hope of reaching their goal. "I will certainly elude you," he confesses. "Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you" (346).

Whitman challenges traditional poetic genres throughout *Leaves of Grass*, often mixing elements of history, epic, platform address, and personal confession. With its individualized voice, insistent privacy, and interest in psychological exploration, Calamus may be Whitman's most lyric cluster of poems, though he coyly acknowledges and questions the anonymous audience that seems to overhear him.<sup>12</sup> "Whoever You Are," for example, asserts a coherent "I" and then plays with the possibility of lyric disclosure, erotically asserting a genuine connection and then asking if it is illusory. "I give you fair warning, before you attempt me further," Whitman tells readers. "I am not what you supposed, but far different" (1860 344). Like Ernest Longfellow, Whitman appears to open the window shades on his private life—only to ask whether readers can trust what they see. But while Ernest revealed secrets about his famous father, Whitman

was not famous when he received Smith's letter. The poem suggested a mode of reading in which the elusive prophet was one step ahead of his love-struck followers. Smith's response confirmed the role Whitman suggested for readers in inviting them to collaborate on his celebrity.

The story of Susan Garnet Smith offers a valuable perspective on genre, fame, and the expectations of intimacy. When compared to other poetic genres, the nineteenth-century lyric received special praise for its ability to arouse intense feelings of closeness and devotion in its readers. As Virginia Jackson points out, mid-century poetry was unusually "dependent on the mediating hands of editors and reviewers," but it was during this period that "an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated by those hands or those readers began to emerge" (7). Jackson presents this idea as a critical fiction that would unfortunately come to dominate twentieth-century literary scholarship. But the poets themselves were equally responsible for promoting their work as intensely personal and deeply felt. Whitman describes being "chilled with the cold types, cylinder, wet paper" that separated him from his readers (*1860* 143). Comparing the poem to a blacksmith's forge, Emily Dickinson dared readers to look inside and see her soul at white heat (Fr401). With their hyper-intensified voice and concentrated emotional power, such poems engage the audience's sensibilities, asking them to enlarge and, indeed, perform their sympathy with the selves presented on the page. Some poets cultivated lyric intimacy for political purposes. Building on Karen Sanchez-Eppler's study of women abolitionists, commentators from Janet Gray to Mary Loeffelholz have demonstrated how abolitionist poets used the lyric to convey the dehumanizing effects of slavery by establishing a sense of kinship and familiarity with black families (see Gray 32-59, 84; Loeffelholz 67-93).

Mid-century readers gravitated to the intimacy they found in poems. Coaxed to engage emotionally with the speaker (either through reverence, identification, fascination, repulsion, or desire), readers appraised these widely circulated texts by their personal impact. Dickinson described the poem in somatic terms. As she wrote to Thomas Higginson, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me . . . I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry" (Higginson). Dickinson's statement is usually presented as a unique window into her own aspirations as a poet, but it can also tell us what she as a reader expected from verse: a poetry that was visceral in impact, emotionally intense, and physically felt. To borrow a phrase from Hans Robert Jauss, the mid-century lyric created for readers a horizon of expectation in which they found themselves momentarily immersed in an intimacy that was secular and sacred, personal and collective, familiar and transformative at the same time. It was no accident that Americans wrote Sigourney asking her to copy out her poems by hand or to commemorate the death of their child by writing a poem they would hang by the fireplace (Sigourney 377, 373). Sigourney's readers found comfort in both her fame and her poetry, and they wrote in the hopes that a personal connection would deepen and legitimize their attachments. They wanted handwritten versions of poems because they,

like Whitman, wanted to move beyond the cylinder and wet types, and yet they paradoxically cherished those handwritten poems precisely because Sigourney was a public figure. The poet's fans wanted a famous poet to bless and articulate the most meaningful moments in their private lives.

In the nascent culture of celebrity, Whitman and Smith were novitiates struggling to understand the relationship between lyric performance and fan response. Whitman rejected aesthetic approaches to his work, claiming that "No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism" (*Complete* 671). And yet, even after he had considerable experience with celebrity, he viewed Smith's letter as irrational and fanatic, claiming that his fictive persona was never meant to live beyond the page. Just as Whitman could not discern the emergent figure of the fan, Smith struggled to make sense of *Leaves of Grass*. She felt tremendous sympathy with the book, but like many critics, she did not recognize it as a work of art: "I do not know *what* I carry in my arms pressed close to my side and bosom!" Smith read *Leaves of Grass* with a different interpretive apparatus, one in which the voice of Calamus was not a lyric abstraction, but the voice of a charismatic, desire-filled man. Her response confirmed the power of Whitman's poems even as it underscored the question of how they should be read.

According to Marc Jeffreys, it was in the nineteenth century that the lyric began to be "mythologized as the purest and oldest of poetic genres" (197-98). Following recent interrogations of that mythology, Jackson has argued that the elevation of the lyric was responsible for the decline of such mimetic and historical genres as the ballad, satire, and epic, for it posited the lyric as "the one genre indisputably literary and independent of social contingency" (7). Measuring all poems by the lyric, she explains, enforced the idea that poems were self-referential aesthetic objects suspended in space and time (9, 90). As Jackson demonstrates, the practice of lyric reading would develop into a dominant mode of criticism that shifted poetic value from temporality and referentiality to "personal and cultural abstraction" (71).

Smith offers an alternative to the twentieth-century scholarship that Jackson describes. Like the professional scholar, she values the lyric, but she displays little interest in literary abstraction and aesthetics. What Smith discovered in *Leaves of Grass* was an emotional immediacy and sense of mutuality that seemed to bind her life with the poet's. The qualities that led critics to describe Whitman's works as being universal and removed from time and place are ironically the same qualities that allowed fans like Smith to read these works as intensely personal and destined especially for them. The poet, of course, did not direct the Calamus poems to Susan Smith, but the open quality of their address encouraged readers to complete the text themselves, to imagine themselves alone on that hilltop receiving the poet's kiss. Reading as a fan, Smith responded to Whitman's lyric intimacy by personalizing his voice and rooting it in the specific historical conditions in which she consumed *Leaves of Grass*. In an emergent age of celebrity, she turned his lyric invitation into something powerfully urgent to herself.

Rather than see the lyric as simply the product of intervening editors and PhDs, we might ask why nineteenth-century readers were so fond of the intimacy they found in both celebrity culture and lyric poetry. One wonders whether the lyric's capacity to summon intimacy helped privilege the genre at a time when the combined forces of industrialization and print capitalism were creating increasingly abstract forms of public life. Perhaps the lyric poem—with its vigorous semblance of selfhood and personality—helped compensate for this dehumanizing structural shift. For fans inclined to seek personal fulfillment through public life, poets themselves could accrue a quasi-religious aura, especially if they presented themselves (or had been presented) as distinctive, cultural personalities.<sup>13</sup> Nineteenth-century readers enthusiastically welcomed writers such as Fanny Fern and Harriet Beecher Stowe who used the tools of print capitalism to connect emotionally with the public. Smith's story might lead us to ask whether the lyric poem was especially effective among poetic genres in creating the selfhood and mutuality that so many readers desired.

### **Poe and the Metaphysics of Fan Communities**

Mid-century poetry in the United States was an art form bordered on one side by Byronism and on the other by the canonization of the Schoolroom Poets, New Englanders such as Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose formal, rhyming verse made them favorites in classrooms around the country. In the decades between these somewhat distinct modes of reception, readers viewed poets as conduits into another world, geniuses gifted with a divine or oracular truth. Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson all subscribed to the notion that poets' gifts set them apart from their readers. The poet "is a seer," Whitman wrote in 1855. "He is not one of the chorus" (*Complete* 10). Noah Porter, the author of an 1871 book titled *Books and Reading*, offered a similar portrait of the poet's singularity. The "poet's genius," he explained, "impels him to employ a dialect of his own which no man can imitate" (as cited in Rubin 21). In her remarkable study, *Songs of Ourselves*, Joan Shelley Rubin argues that this emphasis on the poet as both a sage and seer helped affiliate "poetry with the domain of the sacred and esoteric" (24).

For centuries, the word "celebrity" had religious connotations, and indeed a number of theorists have traced the growth of celebrity to the decline of religious institutions.<sup>14</sup> Celebrities serve secular cultures like Greek gods and goddesses; their stories supply innumerable object lessons in communal principles and values. Chris Rojek has suggested that fans find in celebrity culture the kind of "collective effervescence" that Emile Durkheim saw in religion, "a state of popular excitement, frenzy, even ecstasy" (56-57). Rojek addresses the overtly communal aspects of celebrity and the experience of affirming collective life whether through political rallies, theatrical performances, or sporting events.

The analogy to religion may be equally revealing when we turn to the conditions of reading poetry in the decades surrounding the Civil War. Nineteenth-

century poetry appeared in newspapers, magazines, trade journals, and advertisements as well as in scrapbooks, diaries, letters, and commonplace books. The popularity of poetry led Edmund Stedman to claim at the century's end that poetry led all other forms of American literature between the years 1835 and 1875 (*Anthology* xix). For many Americans, reading poetry was both a solitary and communal act, one that fused a quest for personal inspiration with devotional practice. In the growing secularism of the United States, poetry often appeared as a special discourse, a mode of expression set off from the prose surrounding it. Men and women read poems at weddings, ceremonies, and funerals. They chiseled lines onto gravestones and monuments commemorating the dead. They put their favorite poems to music and copied out passages into elegantly bound scrapbooks and portfolios containing other cherished thoughts.

For some nineteenth-century readers, poetry was especially suited to conveying spiritual truths. The popularity of sentimental verse, with its air of religious and domestic piety, has received a good deal of scholarly attention.<sup>15</sup> But there were pockets of readers and writers who seized upon the poem as a mechanism for exploring the spirit world. Perhaps the most celebrated of these poets was Edgar Allan Poe. From "Al Aaraaf" to "The City in the Sea," Poe expressed his fascination with pursuing a spiritual beauty that removed him from the earth. The poet scorned the revelations of science for "treasure in the jewelled skies" ("Sonnet—To Science"). He imagined the dim vales and cloudy woods of fairy land, delighting in the "forms we can't discover" ("Fairy-land"). He wondered about the shadowy realm of "Eldorado" and the "Out of SPACE – out of TIME" atmosphere of "Dream-Land." Poe's speakers pine to sing like the angel Israfel whose lyre casts a spell over the cosmos. To Poe, the poetic imagination continually crossed the threshold of metaphysics and consciousness, striving to usher readers into other realms. In "The Poetic Principle," he notoriously limited poetry to brief works that achieve the singularly unified, but transient, effect of producing an "elevating excitement" (71). Not only did this definition privilege the lyric, but it strongly suggested that the genre was constituted around its capacity for psychological (and sometimes metaphysical) transport: "A poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites by elevating the soul" (71).

Poe's fascination with crossing spiritual boundaries inspired a circle of women poets who, after his death in 1849, claimed that they were communicating with his spirit telepathically. The center of this group was Poe's former lover Sarah Helen Whitman, though it grew to include such poets as Mary Forest, Lizzie Doten, and Sarah Gould. As Eliza Richards has explained, the group's mesmeric contact with Poe helped them form a "mystic kinship system" that stretched up and down the Atlantic seaboard (130-31). In poems and letters to each other, the women conveyed the messages Poe had sent them from the spirit world, often adopting key symbols and techniques from his poems. "Pray for me, Helen; Pray for me," Poe's spirit told Gould, who reported the message to his former lover, a woman whose eyes he once described as ministering to his benighted soul (see "To Helen"). Multiple messages arrived in the trochaic lines

of "The Raven" in which Poe's voice seemed both to possess and facilitate the poems of his admirers.

With their shared emphases on personality, magnetism, and the real fellowship that can arise from phantom intimacies, mesmerism played a crucial role in the growth of celebrity in the United States. Poe had an active interest in mesmerism and its association not only with what we would call hypnosis, but also spiritualism, the occult ability to speak with the dead. He addressed mesmerism in three short stories written in 1844-45. Two of these stories, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and "Mesmeric Revelation," brought Poe considerable attention from readers who thought they were the records of actual scientific experiments (Silverman 230-31, 296). Poe had attracted sizeable crowds as a lecturer, and he was notorious for his biting literary criticism. But the primary site of his feverish fame was New York City and its private salons. At these polished, domestic gatherings, Poe's wit and charm were on display to an invited group of writers and intellectuals. After "The Raven" appeared in 1845, Poe became an especially feted guest at Anne Lynch's salons in which he added to his indecorous reputation by carrying on a number of flirtations with married women (Silverman 279-81).

Sarah Helen Whitman and her circle of spiritualists ushered Poe's spirit back into this familiar network of affectionate, feminine bonds. Poe had satirized the coterie aspects of fame in stories such as "Lionizing" and "Nosology," but after his death, these bonds helped bolster his beleaguered reputation. As fanatical as they might seem, Gould, Doten, and Whitman drew themselves into the collaborative performance of Poe's celebrity. They circulated their paranormal transmissions, reported their contacts in the newspapers, and published the poems that they received from the departed author. As Richards has demonstrated, they created a body of work that was critical both to consolidating Poe's reputation and building an expanded community of fans. In 1873, the English writer John Ingram initiated a correspondence with Mrs. Whitman that would last until her death in 1878. In his second letter, he included two poems, explaining, "I send these verses to show you how long I have been under the weird influence of Poe" (Miller 10).

Sarah Helen Whitman had an especially intimate relationship with Poe, and we would not want to confuse her with the fandom of Susan Garnet Smith and Longfellow's would-be wife. She had long been interested in mesmerism, and in 1848 she wrote Lynch inquiring whether "Mesmeric Revelation" was true. Lynch arranged an introduction, and the two writers quickly came to regard each other as soul mates (Silverman 348-49). The couple often described their relationship in mesmeric and spiritualist terms as if their attraction could only be explained by a telepathic magnetism. As Poe described it in a twelve-page love letter, he felt a "praeternatural thrill" from Helen's touch; when her hand rested in his, his "whole soul shook with a tremulous ecstasy" (Silverman 364). Despite their passion, she rejected Poe's marriage proposal a year before his death, citing the gossip about his weak moral principles (Silverman 366). While interest in spiri-



tualism and the paranormal swept across the United States in the 1850s, there was something quite personal in Whitman's attraction to the practice. In claiming mesmeric communications with Poe, she was actualizing the spiritualistic idiom in which their romance had expressed itself.

Whatever qualifiers we might place around Sarah Helen Whitman, it can be illuminating to think about her coterie of friends and poets as a literary fan group. Their collective vision of Poe as an otherworldly source of spiritual and poetic powers is a revealing example of what Henry Jenkins has described as "textual poaching," a practice in which consumers appropriate cultural products and deploy them for items of their own making. "Media fans," Jenkins explains, "are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate" ("Strangers" 208). Poe's circle of admirers fits many of the criteria Jenkins sees at the heart of fan communities: a distinctive mode of reception (poetic transmissions from the beyond), a particular interpretive community (admirers who recognize the key tropes and symbols embedded in the poet's psychic communications), and an alternative social community (a predominantly female group defined against a male literary establishment that expressed disdain for both them and Poe). Susan Smith found in *Leaves of Grass* "an affinite soul" and a way to understand the "universal love" she saw encircling the world. Through their shared performance of Poe's celebrity, these women established their own aesthetic identities.

Sarah Gould's poem "The Serpent Horror" is an especially good example of the creative possibilities of fandom. First published in *Asphodels* (1860), the poem tells the story of a reluctant female medium who is overtaken by a coiling black snake. In loose but infectious trochees, the poem narrates how this spiritual possession interrupts the speaker's reverie and fills her with overwhelming dread. In letters and conversation, Gould and Whitman identified this otherworldly serpent as the lost, unsettled Poe: "Still more tightly did he fold me! / Tightly, and more tightly still! / And I had not the strength to hold me / In resistance to his will" (18). As the serpent coils around her, writhing in her heart, the speaker feels that she is "sinking, soaring, flying" in a state that is neither death nor sleep (19). The medium's vision is so strong that when she turns back to nature, it appears to be crawling with decay:

Earth, on which I feared to tread,  
Seemed a monster, dark and dread,  
Brooks and rivers, and the ocean,  
Took a twining, slimy motion;  
Ay, the clouds above them all,  
Changed to serpents, great and small. (19)

Nathaniel Hawthorne suggested in *The Blithedale Romance* (1850) that the spiritual transference at the heart of mesmerism expressed itself as a kind of public performance. Hawthorne's Veiled Lady gains her celebrity by astonishing



**Figure 3:** Sarah Helen Whitman dressed for a mesmeric experiment in automatic writing. Courtesy, John Hay Library, Brown University Library.

eager audiences in town after town. The spiritual possession described in “The Serpent Horror” explores celebrity from the perspective of the fan. Just as the serpent seizes the speaker’s body, drawing her into the “subtle cords of sleep,” Poe’s spirit enters the mesmerist Gould, and she herself becomes a Poe-like snake. ““Oh, ye heavens! I shuddering moan, / I too am a serpent grown”” (19). She hisses and coils in a poem that artfully establishes her own voice in relation to the spirit’s power. The poem echoes “The Raven” to the extent that some might call it derivative, but as Richards has explained, “The Serpent Horror” implicitly questions the poetic value of originality in creating a “doubled-lyric voice” in which the poet becomes the ghost and the ghost a poet (133). In this allegory of fandom, Gould temporarily relinquishes personal control and produces a tormented, divided work about finding herself as a fan and a poet.

Gould’s poem exemplifies the intertextuality that scholars have long seen at the heart of fandom.<sup>16</sup> “The Serpent Horror” resembles other examples of fan fiction and poetry in combining literary consumption and production at the same time. The poet creates a hybrid text that relies on Poe’s fame but also works to create its own discursive space. The poem’s mesmeric setting implies that Poe wields a subconscious influence over Gould, that fandom is indeed an irrational, haunted state. And yet, in dramatizing her possession, the poet engages in an act of self-creation that gives her an autonomous, albeit networked, sense of aesthetic identity.

Jenkins has written that “Fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundation for the construction of an alternative cultural community” (*Textual Poachers* 223). Literary scholars might reflect on Jenkins’ comments as they investigate the important cultural work achieved by nineteenth-century readers who integrated poetry into their communal lives. The circle that gathered around Poe’s spirit kept his reputation alive when the established critics viewed him with contempt. We find similar strains of fandom, mysticism, and self-improvement in the group of men from Bolton, England who supported Walt Whitman’s works in the face of critical neglect.<sup>17</sup> If we can regard these groups as fan communities, then what of the people who gathered around literary genres rather than celebrities? Does fan theory help us understand the nineteenth-century students who shared the scrapbooks of verse they had lovingly clipped from newspapers and magazines? And how might we assess the dialogue between the students’ handwritten poems and the printed texts they had pasted on opposing pages? As Ellen Gruber Garvey has suggested, perhaps *gleaning* is a better metaphor than poaching to describe such activities, for it exchanges a metaphor of violent appropriation for one that recognizes that texts have surplus meanings (Garvey 207-08). “The Serpent Horror” may depict Poe as a metaphysical threat, but the poem implicitly encourages fans to see him as a literary benefactor. Along with their compatriots, Sarah Helen Whitman and Sarah Gould used Poe’s poetry to cross between mystic conceptions of death and the gendered world in which they lived. In elevating Poe’s fame, they developed a method of reading—and writing—that insisted on their own creative personali-

ties. The intimacy they felt during their mesmeric encounters ultimately became the intimacy they produced among themselves.

### Gender and the Institutionalization of Poetry

Next to the robust Susan Smith and the talented Sarah Gould, the faux Mrs. Longfellow seems dowdy, parochial, and confused. In her very anonymity, however, she suggests the breadth of Longfellow's popularity and the role he carved out for verse. We have no records of this woman beyond Ernest's memoir, and we do not know whether she read Longfellow's poems at all. But crossing the poet's threshold and laying claim to his home, she exemplifies the bridge Longfellow created between the nation's leading authors and the growing middle class. It was an unusual role for him to play. Longfellow possessed tremendous sophistication and learning, but he had little interest in the kinds of public performance that marked Poe's and Whitman's careers. In both his verse and social interactions, he tended to deflect attention away from himself, and he shunned the lecture circuit that helped enrich such friends as Holmes, Emerson, and Lowell. Longfellow may have been comfortable writing letters, sitting for portraits, marketing his poems, and meeting fellow dignitaries, but he was reluctant to perform the rites of celebrity that would dominate the United States in the coming century.

In many ways, Longfellow reflected the inchoate nature of celebrity culture in the middle of the nineteenth century, a time when there were few precedents guiding the relations between writers and their fans. He rejected the public performance of celebrity only to situate that performance at home. As if it could magically reconcile the hazards of public life, Craiggie House became the site of Longfellow's publicity. With his box full of autographs and congenial manners, the poet greeted the public like a benevolent lord. Longfellow's diary records that he received as many as fourteen visitors a day, and yet he managed to integrate the distractions into his life as the nation's most prominent citizen-poet. His resilience is particularly impressive. "In the evening numerous callers," he wrote in his December 19, 1878 diary entry. "Notwithstanding all these interruptions I contrived to write a part of 'Herod's Banquet' [for the Divine Tragedy]" (Longfellow *Memorial* 148).

Longfellow came to represent a fusion of patrician eminence, bourgeois domesticity, and the institutionalization of poetry. As Irmischer has pointed out, "For Longfellow, being an author meant being a father," and readers looked to him as a wise and stable patriarch, a man who presided over poetry as if it were part of his household affairs (76). One of the ironies of Longfellow's career is that this reputation may actually have encouraged readers to breach his privacy. He had long associated his authorial persona with the domestic labors of raising children. Pictures of his study and family circulated throughout the world in books and *cartes-de-visite* so that the atmosphere of Craiggie House came to play a foundational role in his public image. To cross the threshold into Longfellow's



**Figure 4:** An undated lithograph of Longfellow in his study, entered into the Library of Congress collections in 1887. Courtesy, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC. LC-DIG-pga-01596.

study was to enter the mystery and institution of authorship in the United States. It was to understand the charms and curiosities of a poet's life. Longfellow was a professional author whose work hearkened back to pre-professional times. He built his fame on a collection of attractive emotions and ideas: a nostalgia for the past, a faith in traditional authority, a desire for self-improvement, and a recognition of the family as a source of personal sentiment and national meaning.

Longfellow had long appealed to the aspirations of the American middle class, urging his readers to strive for greater and greater accomplishments. Although we know nothing of her reading habits, the faux Mrs. Longfellow in many ways presented herself as the ultimate aspirant, a woman ready to take her place in Craige House's established social order. Rather than express newly awakened spiritual or sexual desires, she claimed to be already married to Longfellow, already integrated into his cultured, bourgeois life. When the poet's friend George Washington Greene asked her to leave the premises, she wanted to know "what right he had to interfere" as if he were intruding in *her* domestic space. "Get away, you old green snake," she rebuked him, and as Ernest tells it, "the old man fled" (E. Longfellow 84). Her story underscores the perception that the world of poetry could elevate readers' lives.

"The poem," Theodor Adorno famously remarked, "is a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, op-



pressive” (39-40). Longfellow did not protest social alienation as much as he symbolized poetry’s association with the meaning, sentiment, and stability of the middle class. Poetry became an institution, a vehicle for overcoming social divisions, not through the merger of language and metaphysics, but through the evocation of character, virtue, and refinement. To Longfellow’s fans, poetry meant reading by the fireside to family and friends. As he wrote in the Dedication to *The Seaside and the Fireside*, “I hope, as no unwelcome guest, / At your warm fireside, when the lamps are lighted, / To have my place reserved among the rest / Nor stand as one unsought or uninvited” (Longfellow *Complete* 99). Poetry was both the means to social advancement and one of advancement’s most cherished prizes. Reading poetry—or simply following the lives of poets—was the reader’s counter against a hostile social environment.

My discussion of Susan Smith, Sarah Gould, Sarah Helen Whitman, and the faux Mrs. Longfellow has been guided by the materials available to me, and it would be a mistake to conclude that fandom was an explicitly female identity. In their own ways, however, each of these stories points to larger questions about the erotic undercurrents in the celebrity-fan relationship: one woman fantasizes about marriage; another pledges to bear a child; another wrestles with the poet in the form of a writhing, rapacious snake. To varying degrees, the cultures of celebrity and mid-century poetry worked together like a braided strand in which each created and reinforced the other’s professions of intimacy. Some might be tempted to dismiss these relationships as insignificant, to see them as symptoms of a patriarchal popular culture that continues to associate the entertainment preferences of women with hysteria and frenzy. Fandom, from such a perspective, is rooted in a compulsive irrationality, a fanaticism without volition or insight. I would argue differently. The experience provided an arena for self-determination, a means through which women such as Gould and Smith came to orient their lives and desires. No matter how ecstatic, agonized, or deluded their responses may seem, they created the necessary discursive space to navigate their own identities. Reading as fans provided these women with a path to subjectivity.

As the archive opens up, scholars will want to think more about the nineteenth-century men and women who announced themselves to the nation’s leading poets with a list of requests and demands. The relationships these fans imagined often suggested a latent desire to control the public writer and, by extension, lay claim to the public sphere. As if they were democratic patrons, they viewed the famous as friends they could trust, heroes they could admire, and pens they could borrow to commemorate their own lives. Sigourney seems to have attracted an inordinate number of these requests, perhaps because as a woman and an educator, she was more easily accepted into domestic space—or perhaps because male fans found it more appealing to contact—and in one sense possess—female celebrities.

Scholars of the nineteenth century have the opportunity to cross the threshold between sociological and literary analysis, to understand the ways in which the



intimate registers of fandom both contributed to—and resisted—the institutionalism of poetry. As we continue to research the emergence of different reading practices, we will want to better understand the continuum that links the fireside reader, the industrious student, and the exuberant fan. Central to this activity will be determining how to balance an appreciation for poetry as both a form of art and a form of media. The impact of such work extends beyond the nineteenth-century United States. Exploring the world of fans demonstrates the vibrancy and diversity of poetry, its remarkable capacity to reinvent itself in so many personal, cultural, and historical settings. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke declared that poets create “equipment for living,” implying that poems are the means through which poets confront life’s perplexities and risks (61). The history of fandom reminds us that poetry is equally interesting when readers seize upon it as their own crucial equipment.

## Notes

The author wishes to thank Mike Chasar, Eliza Richards, and Heidi Bean for their many helpful suggestions on this essay.

1. The Hutchinson Family singers were a group of brothers and sisters from New Hampshire who performed at sold-out concerts throughout the United States during the antebellum era. They were frequently heralded for their nativist pride and commitment to both abolition and women’s rights. Originally a huckster and clown, Dan Rice (1823-1900) became one of the wealthiest American circus owners in the 1850s, turning his traveling shows into respectable middle class entertainment. His cultivation of a southern audience during the Civil War led to charges that he was a “secession showman,” but by the end of the 1860s he had largely rehabilitated his reputation by making substantial donations to veteran Union soldiers. On Longfellow’s absorption into schools, see Angela Sorby’s discussion in *Schoolroom Poets*. Christoph Irmscher discusses Longfellow’s popularity in his revelatory study *Longfellow Redux*, a work to which I am enthusiastically indebted.

2. John Greenleaf Whittier believed that the incessant demands of correspondence contributed to Longfellow’s death.

3. Edwin Forrest (1806-1872) was a charismatic American actor who was especially celebrated by the Bowery B’hoys of lower Manhattan. A lifelong Democrat and fierce defender of American nationalism, he created a rivalry with the English actor James Macready that helped ignite the Astor Place Riot of 1849. Adah Isaacs Menken (1835-1868) was an actress of uncertain origin who was largely touted as the United States’ first sex symbol, appearing (as she did in *Mazepa*) in a skin-colored costume to audiences throughout the United States and Europe. On the rise of celebrity culture in the antebellum period, see Blake, 21-58; on Adah Isaacs Menken, see Sentilles.

4. One of the stars of the lyceum circuit, the poet and adventurer Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) chronicled his extensive international travels in a series of highly popular newspaper columns and best-selling books.

5. See Levine’s discussion of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 11-81.

6. Martin Tupper (1810-1889) was an English poet whose *Proverbial Philosophy* was one of the best-selling poetry books in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century. His popularity resulted in invitations to the White House and friendships with some of the nation’s most influential families. Lydia H. Sigourney (1791-1865), the “sweet singer of Hartford,” published her first book of poems anonymously in 1815. By the 1840s, she had abandoned her anonymity and become one of the nation’s most famous writers, renowned for her ideas about education, abolition, and, most of all, her religiously themed elegies.

7. My interest in the “social history of poetry” echoes David D. Hall’s “social history of culture,” a phrase he uses throughout *Cultures of Print*, 1.

8. See, for example, the readers Ceniza and Robertson describe in their respective works on Whitman.

9. On Lind’s intruders, see Willis, 231-33. On parasocial relationships, see Giles, 126-42 and Leets, de Becker, and Giles, 102-23.

10. I quote from the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the text Smith must have read. For the reader's convenience, however, I refer to the poem by the title, "Whoever You Are Now Holding Me in Hand," that Whitman gave it in 1867.

11. For a discussion of how Calamus creates the sensation of public intimacy, see Blake, 145-73.

12. On the history of equating the lyric with overhearing, see Jackson's discussion of John Stuart Mill, 129-33.

13. My comments here echo Walter Benjamin's discussion of movie stars in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity" (231).

14. Braudy talks about the celebrity as an extension of Christianity throughout *The Frenzy of Renown*. Gabler in *Life: The Movie* argues that celebrity is a response to the secularization of society, 173-76.

15. Among many excellent sources, let me highlight two landmark studies: Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 240-49 and Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture*, 107-19.

16. On intertextuality and fandom, see Sandvoss, 23-26.

17. On the Eagle Street College, see Robertson, 198-231.

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