

page 1054 and to my discussion of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *A Servant of the Queen*, and *Nightwood* in the final section of the essay. Here I suggest that by relating critically and reflexively to prevailing scripts, stories can incite readers to reflect on what sorts of things should be narrated and on how and why narration should proceed. In other words, I explore how some stories are designed to subvert received ideas about narrative. Though my exploration is of course only a beginning, the essay does in fact adumbrate how a postclassical narratology might start to come to terms with the most challenging texts—the texts that would most challenge narratology.

More generally, however, Richardson's point that certain experimental texts "forcibly implode, subvert, or deconstruct the basic identifying features of conventional or nonfictional narrative" does not invalidate the search for models that help describe and explain such features. Indeed, in the absence of at least a tacit theory about the basic identifying features of stories, how could one even formulate the proposition that some narratives "challenge the limits of narrative"? Far from being a theoretical impossibility, then, investigating what makes a story a story is a prerequisite for studying the innovative texts Richardson mentions. Even "antinarratologists" invariably assume some sort of theory about what narratives are and how they work. My aim is thus less to propose a "universal theory of narrative" than to argue that, universally, narrative analysts operate with core theoretical assumptions about the narratives (and antinarratives) they study. A postclassical narratology should try to articulate those grounding assumptions as explicitly as possible, in order to reassess their nature and scope.

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## Melville and American-Renaissance Discourse

To the Editor:

Any argument that female writers have been excluded from, or marginalized in, a literary canon will inevitably seem tendentious to the extent that it depends on a corresponding downgrading or suppression of male writers. In "What American Renaissance? The Gendered Genealogy of a Critical Discourse" (112 [1997]: 1102–20), Charlene Avallone is guilty of marginalizing a work by a male writer who, like the female authors she wishes to boost, was for many years marginalized by the creators of an approved American canon. Avallone disposes of Mel-

ville's extraordinary review "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in a single misleading sentence that follows on two other equally confusing sentences. This is the skewed passage to which I am referring:

Despite the commonplace early-nineteenth-century belief that the newly independent United States would give birth to a unique literature, no discourse of literary rebirth or renaissance emerged in the antebellum period. While some writers emphasized analogies to the European Renaissance, others challenged such ideas. Melville linked critics' "great mistake" in imagining an American literature "in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day" with Americans' "Anglo Saxon superstitions" ["Hawthorne and His Mosses," *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston: Northwestern UP; Chicago: Newberry Lib., 1987) 245–46]. (1104)

The claim that "no discourse of literary rebirth or renaissance emerged in the antebellum period" is suspect for at least three reasons. (1) Although *renaissance* comes from the French for rebirth and, as applied to a period of European literary, artistic, and scientific history, referred to the so-called Revival of Antiquity and Revival of Learning and to the rebirth of the arts and sciences after the so-called medieval Dark Ages, the term was, in the main, applied to American literature simply to label a period of exemplary literary activity and maturity. (2) The *renaissance* label (which could only have been understandably applied after the event—i.e., postbellum) was inevitable because that aspect of the Renaissance which pertained to England, particularly the era of Shakespeare, was the natural comparison and spur. The ambitions of American writers—mainly competitive men, it is true—inevitably took the form of wishing to equal or surpass Shakespeare. Clearly, then, Avallone's statement that "some [American] writers emphasized analogies to the European Renaissance" directly contradicts her previous sentence. Such analogies constituted the "discourse of . . . renaissance . . . in the antebellum period" and subsequently. (3) In the mind of anyone knowledgeable about American literature, the assertion that there was no such discourse before 1861 would immediately trigger some recall of Melville's 1850 review "Hawthorne and His Mosses," with its famous boast that Hawthorne approaches Shakespeare in literary stature. Indeed, "Hawthorne and His Mosses" is a, perhaps the, foundational document in the discourse of a putative American renaissance.

Avallone knew that she had to take some account of Melville's review, but instead of giving Melville his due, she mean-spiritedly mangles and unfairly abbreviates a quotation from the review to give the false impression

that Melville was among those writers who “challenged” and presumably denied the relevance of any analogy between American literature and the European Renaissance. The complete sentence from which Avallone selectively quotes reads as follows: “The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth’s day,—be a writer of dramas founded upon old English history, or the tales of Boccaccio.” In other words, such a genius will be as original as Shakespeare was. Melville is making the reverse of Avallone’s point. At the same time, Melville’s sentence is evidence that there most definitely was an antebellum American-renaissance discourse; however foundational in this respect his review may be, Melville did not initiate that discourse.

Some would maintain that Melville himself was that Shakespeare-like genius, and it is indeed unfortunate that he was not a woman. And certainly it is unfortunate that the creative geniuses Melville mentions in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” are all male. But Melville at least implies a symbolic gender balance by casting himself in the female role, as a virgin (a “Virginian” [239] with “a hot-headed Carolina cousin” named Cherry [247, 240]) deflowered by an inspiring Hawthorne (if Shakespeare did not get there first) who “has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, . . . and further, and further, shoots his strong New England roots into the hot soil of my Southern soul” (250). Of course, Avallone might well resort to the stock response that, not content with excluding women writers, canon constructors of Melville’s ilk, in imagining they encompass female experience, appropriate it and thereby add insult to injury.

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### *Reply:*

David Ketterer disputes the imputed argument and “stock response” of a feminist straw woman instead of engaging my essay. The point of the essay is neither to malign male writers nor “to boost” women but to invite reconsideration of the grounds on which nineteenth-century writers are valued and to raise the possibility that more-equitable evaluation might avoid replicating gender and racial hierarchies.

Ketterer’s attempt to discredit my argument rests on our differing interpretations of Melville’s “Mosses” essay. Ketterer largely restates Matthiessen’s reading of the essay, while I understand the larger context of the essay as undercutting analogies between antebellum writers and writers only later labeled Renaissance authors. I believe that my reading can be maintained as readily as Ketterer’s restatement of Melville’s thought “[i]n other words,” especially since Ketterer’s reading does not account for Melville’s broader gibe at “Anglo Saxon superstitions” and resorts to a conclusion that “[s]ome would maintain” but that neither Melville nor several decades of renaissance critics did in fact maintain. If Melville’s essay is in some ways “foundational” for Matthiessen and therefore for some renaissance critics following Matthiessen, my essay should make clear that it is not so for the critical discourse of renaissance generally. But Ketterer’s letter, instead of deliberating the history I describe and the larger definition I derive from it, reiterates the presumptions of renaissance criticism following Matthiessen. Although he repeatedly labels those presumptions “inevitable,” when the process through which they were evolved is taken into consideration they appear less inevitable or simple and less like “reasons” than he maintains. The emotional intensity of Ketterer’s impassioned defense of a renaissance Melville suggests the investment that some continue to maintain in the androcentric critical tradition.

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