Chapter 6

Where the Masses Met the Classes

Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century American Newspapers and Their Significance to Literary Scholars

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Up until the 1980s, the thousands of literary works—even those by popular and well-respected authors—that were first published in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American periodicals had received only minimal attention from scholars. Found only in musty bound volumes, decaying piles of newsprint, or hard-to-read microfilm, these publications were widely regarded either as low quality productions or as inferior, nonauthoritative versions of texts later published in book form; in both cases, it was believed, they well deserved to be consigned to the shadows of literary history. With the rise of New Historicism, however, this situation began to change dramatically. Because the chief goal of New Historicism is understanding how literary texts influenced readers and their cultures, scholars employing this approach highly value the versions of literary texts that reached the greatest number of readers. And since the texts with the largest audiences before 1920 were typically serialized, a steady stream of scholars in the 1980s started investigating American periodicals and the literary works they contained. Soon thereafter, in 1991, the field had its own organization—the Research Society for American Periodicals—as well as a journal: American Periodicals. As a result of all this interest, the past few decades have produced a substantial number of
monographs, essay collections, and journal articles about American periodicals and literature that have greatly broadened the horizons of inquiry for students of this period. Those investigating the serialization of literary works between 1880 and 1920, however, have focused almost exclusively on the role played in American culture by the important magazines of the period, including *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Monthly*, *Century*, *Scribner’s*, *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. In doing so, they have implicitly defined *periodical* quite narrowly, as synonymous with *magazine*. Consequently, the connections between American newspapers and fiction have been almost completely neglected, and very few people even today appreciate how incredibly important newspapers are to the study of American literature during these decades.

Such a scholarly lacuna is especially disappointing to me, for almost 15 years ago, I published *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The Role of Newspaper Syndicates in America, 1860–1900* (1997), in which I documented the histories of the first newspaper syndicates in America, the major role they played in the literary marketplace, and the impact they had on fiction-reading audiences. This book also suggested numerous potential topics for future research in the field. Yet since that time, besides my own articles on serialized fictions in newspapers, to my knowledge only one monograph (Karen Roggenkamp’s *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction*), one essay collection (*Transnationalism and American Serial Fiction*, edited by Patricia Okker), and a handful of articles have been chiefly devoted to the intersections of American newspapers and literary history. While I am heartened by those scholars who have started to briefly mention that many authors of the period published their fictions first in newspapers, and by the efforts of others who have begun to more deeply delve into the small print of newspaper pages and analyze what was printed there, there is much more work that needs to be done. To better understand the careers of numerous authors and how their works impacted American culture between 1880 and 1920, it is simply imperative that scholars more fully investigate the role newspapers played in American literary history. Fortunately for such scholars, there has never been a better time to conduct such research—and the situation promises to continue to improve in the years ahead. This article will highlight just some of the most promising areas for research in this field.