

Melville's Late Limited Editions: Ruptures in the Paradigm of Professional Authorship

In 1888, Herman Melville published his third book of poems, *John Marr and Other Sailors With Some Sea-Pieces*, in a limited edition of twenty-five copies (a format he was to repeat three years later with his final book, *Timoleon, Etc.*). His decision to publish his final two books in limited editions for private distribution radically opposes the trend of increased commercialism and hegemony that came to characterize the publishing milieu during his tenure as a novelist. The unusual trajectory of Melville's publishing history presents a compelling challenge to the modern notion of the proprietary author, offering instead an alternative model wherein an author can function in relation to a variety of non-commercial economies. It is with this alternative model in mind that I will reconsider the ill-conceived notion of Melville as the quintessential literary "failure." That Melville persisted in publishing books of poetry despite their consistently negative reviews and negligible sales resists the widely-accepted narrative that characterizes him as the once great American author who eventually fell in defeat to the disappointments of negative reviewers and the daunting pressures of the commercial book trade. Melville's defiant self-publication challenges the popular concept of literary progress that defined his age and persists into our own. Instead, I will posit a more nuanced reading of his career that rejects the progressive paradigm of literary professionalism in favor of a more complex, multi-faceted understand of the relationship between commercial (embedded) and gift (disembedded) economies. By examining both the material production and dissemination of Melville's limited-edition books, we can begin to understand the extent to which his late publications demand a reconsideration of the modern notion of professional authorship.

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