

affective situation of twenty-first-century readers who can see in nineteenth-century texts so many of the warning signs of the catastrophe to come: “I can follow the narrative, but I know something about coal that Verne . . . doesn’t. I can’t un-know what I know as much as I dream of going back and of forgetting. I can’t read unless I forget, but if I forget I am reading in bad faith” (p. 244). Like so many of the pieces in this outstanding volume, Pinkus’s essay makes us ask *why* we continue to read the nineteenth century—to escape? to learn? to judge?—and how confronting such questions might help us better understand the perils, possibilities, and shape of the crisis at hand.

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RICHARD MENKE, *Literature, Print Culture, and Media Technologies, 1880–1900: Many Inventions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. x + 259. \$99.99.

Brimming with discovery, wit, and intelligence, *Literature, Print Culture, and Media Technologies, 1880–1900: Many Inventions* is a scholar’s feast. Treating fiction of the period as vernacular media theory, Richard Menke unfolds a captivating set of stories about the first media age. You can teach this book to upper-level university students—piecemeal if necessary, as the chapters have considerable standalone value. At the same time, experts in Victorian studies and neighboring fields will find sophistication and nuance to spare. I am less sure that media studies proper will give due attention to a book with literature as the first word of the title—and, oddly enough, I am not sure that the title is accurate, given the equivocal status of literature in the argument. I like Menke’s work so much that I find myself wishing for two alternative versions of this book, one with more literary analysis, and one with none at all—though especially the one with more. But I will continue to review the hybrid before me, and begin by suggesting that a better title might have been *Media Fantasy 1880–1900*, since this is what Menke discusses so skillfully on every page.

Differentiating itself from studies that pay “more attention to writers’ responses to particular media than to how print literature becomes part of a media-rich world” (p. 11), *Literature, Print Culture, and Media Technologies, 1880–1900* treats media technologies not

simply as devices or formats with various plot-shaping properties, but as nodes in an engulfing system. Topics range from the global media response to the 1881 assassination of American President James A. Garfield (including Walt Whitman's poetic contribution) to landmarks of the British novel (the New Woman novel, *New Grub Street*, the end of the triple decker, *Dracula*, and more)—and finally back stateside for a consideration of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. All the richer for the transatlantic scope, the analysis remains sensitive to national differences, even as it articulates the period's spectrum of media fantasies in ways that may not always be regionally specific. Indeed, the period's vernacular media theory does not itself link nationalism and technology as insistently as one might expect. More than feeling British or American, the media fantasies of the time feel simply modern—and this is part of what it means to have not just new technology but a media age: “This impression of living not simply in history but in media history contributed to a modern sense of time and historical consciousness” (p. 12). A wide spectrum of vernacular media theory emerges between 1880 and 1900. Whether those theories see media as convergent or divergent, alienating or connecting, reductive or transcendent, what they share is a new concern with media as a system.

Menke's own media theory is current in a couple of ways. For instance, in noting *Dracula's* unsexy media of logistics and infrastructure (including the Count's stores of dirt), it echoes the expanded definition of media in a recent landmark work, John Durham Peters's *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015). More pervasive in Menke's book is an idea of variantology, in which the story of media is not singular but one of “diverse and shifting intermedial relationships” (p. 193). This is not the technological determinism of previous generations, and many readers will find in Menke's rhetorical modesty a fair measure of relief from the bombastic tradition of Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler. Indeed, even as Menke's book makes good use of that tradition conceptually, it refuses to orient its claims for vernacular media theory in that direction. The *Connecticut Yankee* chapter, for example, declines “to argue for the prescience of Twain's vernacular media theory” (p. 159) even as it shows striking connections between the novel's treatment of orality and literacy and that of Walter Ong. In this framework, the anticipation of a canonical media theorist is simply not the test for the validity of the vernacular. Theory is theory, vernacular or not. And we care about the period much more by analogy—one media age to

another—than as a mere way station for some future of inevitably superior understanding.

The most difficult distinction in *Literature, Print Culture, and Media Technologies, 1880–1900* is thus not between vernacular and academic media theory, but between literature and print culture, as, despite Menke's title, slippage between the terms seems hard to avoid. "Thanks to their ubiquity, cultural centrality (however precarious), and capacity to allow critical examination, printed texts are the nineteenth century's great media for thinking about media," Menke states convincingly, but the subject of the next sentence is not print but "imaginative writing" (p. 21). Five pages earlier we had slipped in the other direction: "The focus on *literary works* reflects my belief that fiction and poetry offer writers and readers some of the most wide-ranging and resonant ways of imagining old and new media, as *print culture* writes its collaborators and rivals" (p. 16; emphasis added). To be sure, Menke remains adept at tracing the period's own interests in maintaining or collapsing versions of this distinction, as when he concludes that the views of one character in George Paston's *A Writer of Books* can be summed up as "literature is what doesn't sell papers" (p. 69), in contrast to the implication in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* that both stationers and novelists "make a living by selling bundles of paper" (p. 81). But Menke's own stance seems to straddle real trade-offs without quite taking their measure. He seems torn between wanting literature to be a medium among media and wanting it to be a special preserve of value.

My own conviction is that it is actually the latter definition that gives literary studies the most leverage on media studies. Rather than reading literature for its theory of media, as interesting as that can be, read the media system for how it makes literature better—more searching, more poignant, more unsettling. A scholar of Menke's abilities has all options. In fact, Menke qualifies himself to work in media history full time, without any recourse to literary representation, should he ever so desire—see for instance his fascinating account in the Twain chapter of the competition between the Paige Compositor (which simulates a print shop) and the slug-casting Linotype (which crudely reimagines one). But what I value most in this book are the sections that really capture how media inform our engagement with poetic experiences and narrative situations. Literature contributes to media studies by helping us feel why media matter.

One of the sections I find especially intriguing is Menke's account of Paston's work in the fifth chapter, and here was a place I would have welcomed a longer look at the literature. George Paston

was the pen name of Emily Morse Symonds, and Menke makes the case for reading her as follows: “such artful and efficient doubling between social concerns and attention to fiction’s forms and conventions typifies Paston’s novels. It is part of what makes them worthy of greater critical attention than they have yet received, but also what makes them particularly responsive to the relationships between print genres and modern media” (pp. 127–28). Reading both *A Modern Amazon*, a rare two-volume novel, and the single-volume *A Writer of Books*, Menke highlights Paston’s artful negotiation of the relationship between book format and narrative structure. With *A Modern Amazon*, the format permits Paston to separate marriage, which ends the first volume, from sex, which looms imminently only at the end of the second, thereby decoupling female desire from economics and companionship. *A Writer of Books*, in contrast, entertains and “reject[s] the marriage plot, the husband’s-sexual-betrayal plot, the free-romantic-union plot, and the death-of-the-heroine plot” (p. 134) to arrive at a plan for its heroine to write that escapes its pages, such that “its ending may even point from the one-volume novel to the no-volume novel” (p. 135). Taken together, space for female desire and ambition emerges as an affordance of media formats—an affordance that comes to light in a print culture in transition. These are the moments that invert Menke’s framing question—that no longer ask just what literature has to offer media theory, but what media theory contributes to an understanding of literature. Like all of the best works of literary scholarship, *Literature, Print Culture, and Media Technologies, 1880–1900* ultimately resubmits us to the problem of form. Saturated with mediation of all kinds, and self-conscious about that saturation, literature in a media age gives shape to emerging modern experience.

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