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**Thomas N. Baker.** *Sentiment & Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xii + 252 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-512073-8.

**Sentiment & Celebrity:  
Nathaniel Parker Willis and  
the Trials of Literary Fame**

THOMAS N. BAKER

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Thomas N. Baker, in his *Sentiment & Celebrity*, addresses two pressing needs of early nineteenth-century literary and cultural history. First and foremost, he provides a solid introduction, based on much archival research, to a sadly neglected writer, Nathaniel Parker Willis, who in his own time was one of the few widely recognized American men of letters. Second, Baker contextualizes Willis's career in the emerging "culture of celebrity"—that self-sustaining conjuncture of social, commercial, and emotional impulses and interests that since Willis's day has increasingly directed our attention toward a kaleidoscopic spectacle of storied personality" (4). Baker can link Willis's career to that culture of celebrity because the author himself was not only a literary "star" in his own right, thanks to his popular religious poetry (a blend of Calvinist Orthodoxy and Wordsworthian Romanticism), but also a founding father of celebrity journalism upon which fame, his included, so much depended. As a travel writer chronicling the lifestyles of the British rich and famous, he poached upon the private lives of his subjects to a scandalous degree. Concerning this intrusive practice, Baker makes the essential point that the exposure techniques of Willis's celebrity journalism grew naturally out of the self-disclosure of his Wordsworthian poetics, for both relied upon a bond of sentiment between authors and readers. In fact, according to Baker, Willis forged such a palpably intimate

bond with his supposedly young female readers that he could be accused of seducing them, literarily, and sometimes even literally. Yet, that his very seductiveness was seen by some other readers as ingratiatingly self-serving, almost obnoxious, only spurred a notoriety that contributed to his fame. Love him or hate him, Willis in his own time could not be ignored.

Modern scholars have perhaps ignored Willis for so long precisely because by twentieth-century standards he is so easy to hate. Who can like the abusive, pro-Southern employer of Harriet Jacobs, as she depicts Willis in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)?—or the maliciously discouraging brother of Fanny Fern (a.k.a. Sara Willis Parton) in her autobiographical *Ruth Hall* (1854)?—or the defender of the allegedly lecherous Bishop Benjamin Treadwell Onderdonk, supported on the grounds that the women parishioners who accused the clergymen asked for what they got and got what they deserved?[1] Indeed, who can like a founding father of invasive celebrity journalism? So, with this unappealing subject, added to the complexity of relating sentiment and celebrity to a single life story, Baker clearly has his work cut out for him.

Baker's response to that challenge has resulted in a book that oddly mirrors Willis himself: significant, but not without blemish. The significance is plain: antebel-

lum cultural and literary historians for generations to come will be doubtless grateful for Baker's presentation of key scenes and episodes in Willis's life. For example, in his second and third chapters, Baker uncovers, like no one before, the underside of the literary world in supposedly staid Boston in the late 1820s through mid-1831, which allowed Willis to hone his characteristic persona of the literary dandy. In chapter four, Baker untangles the controversy surrounding the publication of the privacy-breaching articles that would lead both to an abortive duel with English novelist Frederick Marryat and to Willis's most enduring book, *Pencillings by the Way* (1835). The scene shifts then to New York City, where Baker casts Willis as the protagonist in the struggle of middle-class refinement against working-class cultural democracy, the latter symbolized by the May 1849 Astor Place Riot. Yet Baker is careful to point out the subtlety of Willis's position, for the author was no simple elitist apostle of cultural distinction, but a firm believer in the cultural elevation of the masses through taste mediated by the marketplace. "Was taste, as it sometimes seemed in his handling, a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder?" Baker pointedly asks; "Or was it, as he and other sentimentalists averred, a transcendent ideal to be revered, whatever the cost?" (114). Willis would soon understand the cost when the standard bearer for the "Americans" against the Anglophiles in the Astor Place Riot, Edwin Forrest, emerged as Willis's antagonist in an 1851 divorce case. The trial implicated not only Willis, but the morality of the middle-class aesthetic strategy for which he stood; in the protracted litigation that ensued, Willis himself became the victim of the very journalism of exposure he had pioneered even though he was legally vindicated. Along the way, he received a thrashing by the burly Forrest, for which Willis ultimately received the insult in court of only a dollar's worth of damages. The book concludes with a final ironic turn of the knife: sibling Fanny Fern's fictional revenge, which was made all the sweeter because the controversy it generated helped make her book a best seller. As his sister rose further to fame, Willis, ailing in a rural retreat, would sink into increasing obscurity and irrelevance until his death in 1865.

Insofar as Baker tells this morality tale well and makes keen points about literary celebrity, he successfully fulfills the scholarly needs for a Willis biography and a consideration of celebrity. However, Baker's grasp of the larger cultural and literary context is somewhat incomplete, due perhaps to his perplexing omissions of obviously relevant scholarship. For example, he does not mention the literary historian William Charvat, who in

the 1950s and early 1960s wrote extensively on the making of literary reputations and on the economics of authorship. John Tebbel's multi-volume history of publishing in the United States is also absent, as is the riotous *Raven and the Whale*, by Perry Miller—the latter is particularly relevant for its discussion of cultural tensions in the New York literary world. Nor does Baker allude to Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*, even though she has much to say about the production and reception of sentimental literature from an earlier period, which might qualify some of Baker's claims concerning Willis's significance.[2] Baker overlooks, too, the work of David S. Reynolds, whose *Faith in Fiction* provides an essential backdrop for Willis's sacred poetry and whose *Beneath the American Renaissance* would allow Baker to situate Willis more accurately within the literary field.[3] Engagement with the work of several nineteenth-century cultural historians would also have enriched Baker's discussion: Neil Harris's *Humbug* on celebrity, David Grimsted on rioting and theater, Michael Grossberg on divorce issues, John Spurlock on free love, Daniel A. Cohen on the cultural aspects of high profile trials and on the underside of antebellum Boston publishing, T.J. Jackson Lears on cultural hegemony (cf. 98), both Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* and Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* on cultural hierarchy, and John Paul Pritchard's *Literary Wise Men of Gotham* and Nina Baym's *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* on the critical temper.[4] Baker's account of Willis's development of a professional literary career could only be helped by the burgeoning scholarship on authorship, including Michael Davitt Bell's "Conditions of Literary Vocation," Kenneth Dauber's *The Idea of Authorship in America*, Stephen Railton's *Authorship and Audience*, Michael Newbury's *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, and Grantland S. Rice's *The Transformation of Authorship in America*. [5] Readers who approach Baker's book unaware of all or some of this literature may come away with a skewed picture of the antebellum literary and cultural world. Willis's career in most ways reflected longstanding cultural trends, in some ways it was an intensification of them, and it probably was in no way entirely original. That what Baker has to say could illuminate the important issues these aforementioned scholars raise, however, only testifies to the significance of his book, so the oversights here may be only that he underestimated the important place of his subject within mainstream currents of historical scholarship.

And perhaps it is a similar underestimation of his

material that leads to Baker's at times clever, but often prolix writing style—unnecessary glitter that belabors what is intrinsically an interesting story. For example, when he discusses Willis's attempt to insure open access to public amusements, he unfortunately falls into Veblenesque vagaries that a strict editor might have clarified: "This quasi-populist stance rested on a sociophilosophical creed that grounded its hope of a general refinement of habits and tastes in the efficacy of salutary emulation" (102). In another case, after replaying the tired transition from republicanism to liberalism, Baker writes, as if to breathe new life into the topic through wordiness: "Simply put, [Willis] came to wager that taste, talent, and intellect, sifted in competition for popular acclaim and affirmed by social eclat, might yet be made to rule where station and heritage once held sway, that is, by acting as a sort of herald's college for confirming status and setting tone in a nation generally suspicious of such claims" (89). In this way, entire paragraphs that could be lean sentences lurch by the exhausted reader.

Despite *Celebrity & Sentiment's* incomplete contextualization and occasional stylistic excess, the book should not be ignored as Willis has been for far too long, but rather should serve as a starting point for future studies of that author and the phenomenon of literary celebrity. The role of masculinity in authorship, especially as expressed through the dandyism Baker details, commands attention and cries out for extended treatment. Baker's book also affords rich opportunities for comparative gender analysis with the women authors treated by scholars like Mary Kelley and Susan Coultrap-McQuin; Baker's concluding chapter on the *Ruth Hall* incident in which he defends Willis against Fern supporters (particularly Joyce Warren), is a nod in this direction, but it would have been strengthened by firmer grounding in the literature on masculinity studies.[6] *Sentiment & Celebrity* also advances readership in studies of literary celebrity beyond analyses restricted to the author's perceptions of his or her own reading public, which tend to crowd out the "real reader." [7] Although he construes the broader readership based on the conventional stereotype that women were the most likely consumers of sentiment, Baker to his credit does locate a few Willis readers. Finally and most importantly, Baker rescues literary sentiment itself from its Victorian cliché, by rejecting the idea that sentiment is "inherently pathological" (193 n. 11). However, he stops short of a Foucauldian probing of sentiment's implication in power relations and, consequently, its paradoxical disciplinary undertones. In so doing, he also misses the chance to offer his own analysis of the constraining

aspects of celebrity, which might help explain the ironic reversals of fortune that all too often befall players, like Willis, of the fame game.

#### Notes

[1]. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

[2]. William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (1959; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); idem, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The Papers of William Charvat*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968); John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1972-1981); Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale; The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1956); Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[3]. David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); idem, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

[4]. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); David Grimsted, "Rioting in Its Jacksonian Setting," *American Historical Review* 77 (April 1972): 361-97; idem, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Michael Grossberg, *A Judgment for Solomon: The d'Hauteville Case and Legal Experience in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); John Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially, Part IV; T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 567-93; Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso,

1990); John Paul Pritchard, *Literary Wise Men of Gotham: Criticism in New York, 1815-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963); Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[5]. Michael Davitt Bell, "Conditions of Literary Vocation," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 2, *Prose Writing, 1820-1865*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9-124; Kenneth Dauber, *The Idea of Authorship in America: Democratic Poetics from Franklin to Melville* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Stephen Railton, *Authorship and Audience: Literary Performance in the American Renaissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[6]. Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rut-

gers University Press, 1992). On masculinity, see, for example: David G. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

[7]. For differing approaches to "real readers," see: Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "'Have You Read...?': Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (Sept. 1997), 139-70; idem, "Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary G. Child," *Libraries and Culture* 32 (Summer 1997): 285-323; idem, "Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England," *American Quarterly* 48 (Dec. 1996): 587-622.

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