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Reasons To Anthologize Simms?

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Response 2:

Reasons to Anthologize Simms?

Peter Schmidt

Dr. Moltke-Hansen's is an excellent essay about learned historical amnesia and the responsibilities of scholars and teachers. Attempts have been made for years to revive an interest in Simms and to get his works included in anthologies featuring antebellum U.S. literature and history, but as Dr. Moltke-Hansen shows these efforts have not had dramatic results. My guess (I don't have data on this) is that the majority of course syllabi that include a module on antebellum southern literature follow similar patterns, for those syllabi are influenced by and often dependent upon print anthologies. The irony here is sharp: while American literature historians argue for a broader, more representative inclusion of past authors, our notion of "representative" still contains many unexamined blind spots — and Simms is surely one of them.

One reason perhaps for optimism: the rise of print-on-demand books. Because of the Simms Initiative and the University of South Carolina Press, Simms may actually be positioned better than just about any other U.S. author to benefit from this new technology. (It's a development Simms would have heartily approved, while relishing the irony of it.) Practicing teachers who want to include Simms can, when necessary, circumvent the limitations of current print anthologies. (Print-on-demand technology from university presses and other sources can be helpful in adding other authors to our syllabi as well.) It would be most beneficial if key texts by Simms or other authors poorly represented in anthologies were made available in e-book editions, however, not just via print-on-demand, for a decade from now students may very well be reading far more e-texts than they are print-on-demand books.

So how best to encourage teachers to supplement print anthologies using the new technologies? Have more sessions and panels at conferences stressing useful ways to introduce "new" texts and authors to students, with testimony about what works and what doesn't and why. Make available syllabi to share. Have more panels also devoted to giving new interpretations of the works in question, with a focus on how those new readings also change the questions we can ask about a historical period.

"New" old texts, when they are strange and new to us, are often best introduced by pairing them on syllabi with comparable texts that are canonical, or at least somewhat better known and more frequently taught. Dr. Moltke-Hansen's paper does a good job of suggesting some teaching strategies for a new Simms revival, but it's possible to imagine others. Why not pair Emerson's call for American cultural independence with how the challenge is framed in Simms' "Americanism in Literature"? Why not pair a Poe murder

story with “Grayling; or, ‘Murder Will Out’”? (Or, for today’s generation of students raised in contemporary horror/vampire genres, perhaps include a contemporary example of “horror” writing, or something by Lovecraft, then show them that similar writing was popular in the early 19th century, via Simms and Poe.) With Simms’s romance *Vasconcelos*, if the whole work can’t fit on a syllabus why not excerpt some of the scenes in which the heroine must change her gender and don blackface and pair them with, say, similar cross-dressing or gender-revising scenes in other U.S. romance fiction, such as (to give one example) E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *Hidden Hand* [1859/1888] and her heroine Capitola? (Or let them compare Simms’s heroine with Alcott’s Jo in *Little Women*.) Or juxtapose parts of *Vasconcelos* with relevant scenes from Cooper. Similar strategies should work for other Simms texts.

When print anthologies get revised and new authors added, or more familiar authors have their “representative” anthology texts markedly changed, it happens for a simple reason: because of conference panels and lots of action on scholarly networks, a critical mass of teachers and scholars begins to work with these new texts and approaches and eventually they influence anthology editorial boards. If it will happen — finally — with Simms, this is probably the route the changes will follow. But unlike a decade or so ago, scholars and teachers seeking changes now have new media at their disposal for putting pressure on print anthologies’ canons and how they are taught: print-on-demand, e-books, website databases like Documenting the American South, and other resources can all be combined to change the way things are done. New media won’t solve the problem of how to add one of Simms’s prolix romances to an undergraduate syllabus. But it may encourage those who would hesitate to load a whole novel onto a syllabus to experiment with excerpting powerful portions of Simms in ways that will get students reading and hearing Simms again in conversation and debate with his contemporaries.