When ABC recently announced it was picking up the pilot for a TV series in which Edgar Allan Poe will solve crimes as a detective working in pre-Civil War Boston, the news delighted Poe fans here but triggered a backlash among aficionados in other cities.

The problem wasn't historical accuracy: The show, after all, is supposed to be fiction. The problem was Boston. Writing in The Baltimore Sun, Michael Sragow called the show’s setting an insult to Baltimore, the city where Poe connected with his father’s family, met his young wife, and died. In Philadelphia, Poe blogger Edward Pettit decried the choice of Boston because Philadelphia was the “dark, gothic city where Poe first started writing urban gothic tales.”

These critics have a point. Poe spent most of his life, and did much more of his work, in other cities. But in another sense, ABC is on solid ground. If we think of Poe as an investigator, Boston makes perfect sense. Poe never actually worked as a detective, but throughout his career as a critic and reviewer, he repeatedly, perhaps obsessively, investigated the distinguished writers and editors of Boston. In the process, he uncovered what he saw as literary crimes and exposed a den of cronyism, imitation, and self-righteousness in the city that fancied itself the “Athens of America.”

Over the course of his short life, Poe lived in Boston for at least 11 months. He was born two blocks from the Common on Jan. 19, 1809, after which his parents remained here for several months. As a young man, he moved here in 1827 and stayed long enough to put together his first book, “Tamerlane and Other Poems,” and see it through to publication by Calvin F. S. Thomas, a Washington Street printer. In 1843, though living in Philadelphia at the time, he published his most famous short story, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” here. In 1849 his last poems were published in the Flag of Our Union, a Boston periodical. And his Aug. 28, 1849, letter to his mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, suggests that he was determined to move back to the greater Boston area in the weeks before his unexpected death in Baltimore.

And all along, as a critic and book reviewer working in Richmond, Philadelphia, or New York, Poe kept at least one of his vulture eyes on Boston’s literati. Boston at the time was the center of American literature, not as large commercially as New York or Philadelphia, but deeply influential and alive to new ideas, including (to name a few) Unitarianism, universalism, transcendentalism, romanticism, feminism, and abolitionism. Where others saw a “flowering of the New England mind,” however, Poe saw something else: “the heresy of the didactic.” From 1845 on, he called our writers “Frogpondians,” perhaps because he regarded them as so many croakers who used literature not to delight and move readers, but to argue and preach — as well as to enrich one another.

In his 1845 essay “American Poetry,” Poe railed against “the machinations of coteries in Boston” that had been conspiring with “leading booksellers” and publishers to provide newspaper editors with positive reviews of local writers. Adding charges to his indictment, Poe called this conspiracy both “blackmail” and a “system of petty and contemptible bribery.” In another review written around the same time, he characterized Boston’s literary elite as a “knot of rogues and madmen.”

When it came to individual Boston writers, Poe spent years accumulating evidence of their misdeeds, their violations of both ethics and taste. At the top of his most-wanted list was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Though he might now seem an unlikely perp, the beloved author of “Paul Revere’s Ride” and “The Village Blacksmith” was, in Poe’s view, the worst of Boston’s literary offenders. Held aloft by an adoring “junto” of dishonest Bostonians, Longfellow’s “celebrity,” Poe wrote, was based on “the adventitious influence of his social position as Professor of Modern Languages and Belles Lettres at HARVARD,” and his “marriage with an heiress.”

And Poe had a more specific charge to level against Longfellow: plagiarism. With a detective’s intensity of observation, Poe examined a large number of cases in which Longfellow used the metaphors, rhymes, and ideas of other writers.
For example, arguing that Longfellow’s “Midnight Mass for the Dying Year” was “a singular admixture of Cordelia’s death scene in ‘[King] Lear’” and Tennyson’s “Death of the Old Year,” Poe concluded that “a more palpable plagiarism was never committed.”

To Poe, Longfellow was not just an occasional borrower but “the GREAT MOGUL of the Imitators,” a writer guilty of “the most barbarous class of literary robbery.” In a late essay pointedly titled “Mr. Longfellow and Other Plagiarists,” Poe deployed the detective’s vocabulary, “charging” Longfellow with “theft” and “stealing,” insisting that Longfellow had “committed a...wrong whose incomparable meanness...deserve[s] exposure.”

Beneath the dramatic language, Poe made the case against Longfellow in so much detail that, although few at the time believed him, Longfellow biographer Christoph Irmscher has accepted the verdict: guilty as charged. “Longfellow’s works,” Irmscher writes, “published and unpublished, were pervaded by borrowings, sometimes explicit, more often unacknowledged, from other authors.”

While Poe returned repeatedly to Longfellow’s abuses, he had time to gather evidence against other Frogpondian authors as well. He charged Nathaniel Hawthorne with a lack of originality, claiming that he borrowed his “habitual manner” from “the German [author Johann Ludwig] Tieck.” He charged James Russell Lowell with two offenses: using poetry to vent his “prejudices and crotchets” and using criticism to promote his friends. “All whom [Lowell] praises,” Poe observed, “are Bostonians.” He convicted Ralph Waldo Emerson of being a “mystic for mysticism’s sake,” and he famously mocked the “so-called poetry of the so-called Transcendentalists.”

ABC hasn’t yet said when its Poe pilot will air, but when it does, it’s unlikely to pay much attention to the “crimes” Poe uncovered here or the poets he accused of committing them. More likely, the Poe it features will be the atmospheric writer credited with inventing detective fiction in the startlingly original 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Still, it was critical sleuthing that defined Poe’s engagement with the city of his birth. In exposing the dubious assumptions and ethical lapses beneath the glowing surface of Boston’s literary culture, Poe was attentive, driven, and always on the case.

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