The Rescripting of Cultural Values in Children's Handwritten Newspapers

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Handwritten newspapers appeared in a variety of social contexts in the 19th-century U.S., but the largest extant portion were written by children in home and school settings (Atwood). Recent scholarship on children's handwritten newspapers and books by Joan Newlon Radner, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and others attend to what Kirsti Salmi-Niklander and Heiko Droste, in their introduction to the edited collection, *Handwritten Newspapers* (2019) describe as the "intense interaction between manuscript, print and oral communication and performance" (17).

Sánchez-Eppler's sensitivity to the interrelation of media has been particularly helpful to my thinking, especially her approach to the study of scribal culture as a means of historicizing how child writers and readers articulate relations between media practices and how these media interrelations intersect with, as she puts it in her recent essay, "Copybooks and the Rescripting of Cultural Values," (*Handwriting in Early America*, 2023) the acts of "self-formation and social replication" that "situate children between the adults who instruct and the adults they aspire to become" (xvii). Extending earlier work on children's manuscript practices as a kind of training for the later navigation, reproduction, and expansion of a 19th-century documentary culture that helped underwrite the social order of adult life – a process she calls *practicing for print* – Sánchez-Eppler also helps us think through the signifying possibilities of 19th-century children's scripted, rescripted, and unscripted uses of manuscript, print, and allied media.

Building on Sánchez-Eppler's interest in the recursive relations among media, among cultural values pertaining to childhood and adulthood, and how children's voices enunciate the intersection of those relations, today I want to share some revised and new work on nineteenth handwritten newspapers, including Elizabeth Waterhouse Allen and Lucy (Allen) Powers' *The Gleaner* (1846–1850) held at AAS; *The Ladder* (1849–1853), written by four brothers of the Whiteman family in Philadelphia and held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and William H. Bryan's *The Weekly Press* (1866–1873), held at the Missouri Historical Society. These newspapers tell us a great deal about how children understood their manuscripts in relation to nineteenth-century mediascapes as they scripted and rescripted the publics and the selves that handwritten works could forge.[1]

The Gleaner was a handwritten newspaper published in Massachusetts by Elizabeth Waterhouse Allen and Lucy (Allen) Powers. The Allen sisters came from "a Congregationalist/Unitarian family of good education, excellent character, and moderate means." The sisters' interest in producing this periodical was likely encouraged by their mother, Lucy Clark Ware Allen, who "acted as the manager and taskmaster necessary to the production of two early student newspapers – The Meteor and The Nosegay, printed in 1835–1836." As young adults, Elizabeth and Lucy published The Gleaner from 22 April 1846, until 5 February 1850. The newspaper comprises a running correspondence between the Allen women, complete with personaes and rules for their creation, short fiction, letters and dispatches, poems, riddles, articles, and obituaries. The Gleaner's mode of publication and circulation involved the passing of a book between two sisters who met and read the issues aloud after writing each edition in the

[1] Portions of this talk are drawn from my article, "The Intermedial Politics of Handwritten Newspapers in the 19th-century U.S.," in *Handwritten Newspapers* (2019).

columns of a bound, pre-ruled, commercially available octavo. The production schedule started with small intervals of one or two weeks. These intervals gradually lengthened until it soon took one or two months to put out an issue. One particularly interesting article from the recurring column, "Extracts from a Correspondence," which appears in volume 2, issue number 11, advocates for the penny post. Written under the pseudonym, "Dragonfly," Lucy offered a nationalist theology of communications: "Only establish the one-cent postage, and every man, woman, and child, would become a scribbler – paper mills would become as numerous as cotton, and pens would run as spindles do now." Dragonfly's fantasy entailed the near-infinite production of communications "by pen and ink, and transported by steam," wherein, "[f]eeling, thought, sentiment, [and] narrative, will be flying about the country in every imaginable shape and garb."

According to Dragonfly, postal reform would animate vast structural changes in writing culture as people took advantage of the chance to send inexpensive letters to one another. Much like Elizabeth and Lucy were doing in miniature, Dragonfly imagined that the nation itself would engage in the "self-culture and education" afforded by participation in written correspondence. Moreover, the amplification of writing's pedagogical register, according to Dragonfly, "would be in proportion to the pleasure [men and women] received in sending and receiving communications." All of this, would bind together the different parts of the land…by a thousand bonds of affection and goodwill, crossing and interlacing each other, till, in a short time, thro' the multiplication thus of individual ties and sympathies, the whole country would become wove into one solid, compact body, that no power could tear asunder. And that is just what we ought and must be. Railroads, electric telegraphs, and cheap postage will do it."

The Gleaner's Dragonfly articulates the nationalist-inflected cultural value of practicing for print within the rhetorical registers of a sentimental culture that existed in the decades preceding the U.S. civil war. Similar is the case in the Whiteman brothers' *The Ladder* (1849–1853), published in or near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and held in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The main editor and publisher, John G. Whiteman, produced the newspaper along with his brothers, William, James, and Horace. The brothers ranged in age from eleven to twenty at the beginning of the publication's run. They produced an assortment of articles on natural history, museum exhibitions, past and current technology, and recent events. They also wrote poetry, satire, stories, puzzles, riddles, and reflections on holiday festivities. Many issues include sketches, watercolors, or colored pencil illustrations. Often, multiple issues were bound together in single volume or multi-volume books. Sometimes these books contain works written and inserted at later dates. These handmade books measure approximately three inches by four inches. They have paper covers and hand-stitched bindings.

The Ladder, as a kind of practicing for print, involves a scribal culturing of the social order. The religiously inflected improvement that the Whiteman brothers wished to establish in themselves – as the producers and as the main readers of the newspaper – is succinctly articulated by the title and masthead of the inaugural edition, in which a ladder ascends to the heavens. Indeed, many of the Whitemans' articles and illustrations offer readers a temperance-reformist vision of their potential futures, especially in the early years. In the first book, in which are bound volumes one and two of the newspaper, the brothers illustrate what awaits those who are open to the moral outlook of The Ladder: salvation, represented in the first panel of a comic drawing as a suit-and-top-hat-wearing, print-newspaper-reading figure of socioeconomic respectability. For those closed to such a vision, because they do not read The Ladder, the

Whitemans offer a warning – you court self-destruction, represented in a second comic panel as a scraggly inebriate fond of gin. In volume ten, there appears another image, which depicts the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The image suggests what awaits those who persist in drinking: hellfire. A man stands in the middle of the illustration, surrounded by flaming thunderbolts while holding a bottle of liquor. In moments such as these, the Whitemans articulate a very clear social politics with regard to newspapers: one must make a choice in the world – read to improve one's self, or die.

The final newspaper I want to share with you was published in Washington, Missouri, which sits about an hour west of St. Louis, between 1866-1873. From age 7 to age 13, William H. Bryan wrote, edited, and published *The Weekly Press*, and later, *The Monthly Press*. A home-based, pencil-written newspaper with an active list of paying subscribers (friends and family), offered at rates of $1 for 2 copies per issue per year, 50 cents for 1 copy per issue, and 25 cents if 50 cents was out of reach, William records producing at least 6 copies per issue in one year. He offered a range of content, reporting on local weather, agriculture, business, school, and public lectures and events. He sold advertising space. He diligently reported on "river news," brought to town by packet on the Missouri River from Augusta, St. Charles, and St. Louis. He wrote up advice columns and humor columns; commented on (fomented?) religious strife between Catholics and Protestants; and reported on elections. He also noted the comings and goings of friends and family, especially when they served as sometime-contributors to the paper's contents, mourning the loss of prior contributors and celebrating their replacements, especially when they constituted an upgrade in orthography. He was very interested in the news ecosystem of his community, giving over ample column inches to reporting on local printers' businesses and reprinting the news; he also contributed to other handwritten newspapers being produced among

Washington's children and exchanged papers with them, including his brother, "C. Bryan," whom he probably inspired to start his own paper. William even began a capital improvement campaign to buy a tabletop printing press and convert his paper to a printed affair, much like so many of the amateur newspapers held at the American Antiquarian Society. William reports having raised $40 at one point, needing $50 he said to buy all the stock and supply needed to enter into the print public sphere of Washington, MO.

In part, as in the Allen sisters' *The Gleaner* and the Whiteman brothers' *The Ladder,* William's work on *The Weekly Press* was an act of moral self-instruction. What strikes me about William's newspaper is the generic recursivity of the public *and* private textual mediations entailed by such instruction. Consider, for example, the recurring column, "Advice, or the Contents of a Copybook, by the author of 'Chirstmas Will Come." William's advice column draws upon the genre of the copybook. Of course, copybooks, with their pedagogical expectations of the written repetition of often moralizing chestnuts, can be quite intimate in scope, but they are never wholly private, as the child writer's expectation of adult supervision/surveillance was an important threshold. William doubles down on this self-consciousness understanding of such writing as a kind of public writing for public consumption. His paper was a public performance of virtue - a handwritten copybook entry of a kind that is "imbricated in the circuits of printed things" (Sánchez-Eppler, "Copybooks," xvii).

The repetitions are not only of authoritative, moralizing quotations. The column itself, though ostensibly "new" material in each installment, is itself a repetition on the order of the serial publication. The earliest extant column from the series is described in the July 2, 1870 issue as "Writing No. 3," and was explicitly written "For the Press." In each subsequent column and the issue at large, the paper's readers (again friends and family) are offered the opportunity

to witness William's Christian middle-class striving as concomitant with the improvement in his own hand – tracking the columns over a couple years, one can see William's "improvement." William could see it, too, and he was feeling particularly ambitious about the prospect of future readers' appetite for witnessing his own growing prospects for becoming the young man his childhood self imagined in these columns. In later issues, William describes his entries as "Chapters," and by 1872 he advertises that the complete series - again, copied by hand once more! - is available at his "printing" office in book form for *only* 15 cents!

William's public reinscriptions of his advice column and the copybook genre itself wonderfully illustrate how the intermedial conditions of communication inflected nineteenth-century children's understandings of cultural values and their self-understandings in relation to those values. *The Weekly Press*, as well as *The Gleaner* and *The Ladder*, more generally illustrate how children's handwritten newspapers illuminate how the social meanings of communicative forms and practices exist in relation to their material mediation. In sketching cartoons, young men made class-inflected claims about the moral utility of writing and reading newspapers; young women advocated for reforms in postal communication that might enable nationalist utopias of sentiment; and by publishing an advice column modeled in part on the generic and material practice of the copybook, the editor of the *The Weekly Press* asked readers to bear witness to and support a child's self-conscious performance of self-making. In all of these cases, children articulated social logics about handwritten media by incorporating a wide range of communicative forms and technologies, interweaving the shifting elements of their media environments to make their newspapers, actively producing the cultural value of the handwritten in the making.

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