

Children Composing Themselves: Genre, Gender, and Invention

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I open with two portraits of the authors I will be focusing on today. On the left is Rebbly Leaming, a 13-year-old girl from Villanova, Pennsylvania, who grew up in the shadow of the American Civil War. Here she is in 1864, portrayed around the age when she authored the text that we will look at today. On the right, we see Grace Fisher Pennypacker Coolidge, a one-time child writer from a Boston family in 1867, pictured nearly thirty years later—as a middle-aged mother, seated with her twins.

I begin with these photographs because when it comes to children of the past, much of what we have assumed and understood about them derives from others' representations of their lives. Today, I would like to turn the tables. That is, how might reading children in their own words unsettle and perhaps challenge these assumptions? When we read writing by children, especially the original stories they composed, what new insights might we gain on how children composed themselves as persons?

To consider these questions, let's turn to two child-authored texts with rather unassuming covers. On the right, we have "The king's daughter, a fairy tale by Gracie C age 8," published by her father in 1867. On the left, a well-worn notebook contains original stories by Rebecca Leaming, which she authored between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. Despite their unassuming appearances, both texts exhibit young writers' dexterous engagements with the popular illustrated press of the time. Both incorporate

standard forms of print publishing while also deploying existing visual and textual norms for new and inventive ends. As a result, both present inventive story worlds that radically destabilize gender and genre norms, as well as child protagonists who unsettle and reconfigure traditional views of children's ways of knowing and being in the world.

I open with the first child-authored text that I viewed here at the AAS.¹ Enclosed in a small paper envelope that fits nicely in the palm of the reader's hand, "The King's Daughter" is a tiny text. Measuring just eight by fifteen centimeters, this small-scale publication consists of four pages of text and two illustrations. Accentuating its uniqueness, the envelope/title page credits the authorship of the small book to "Gracie C***** (eight years of age). I am interested in the fascinating tensions at play between Coolidge's inventive text and the adult appropriation and marketing circumscribing its production. For instance, below the title, we are told by an adult editorial voice that "the original spelling and punctuation are copied, as aiding to preserve the childish simplicity of the story." We also learn that Coolidge's text includes illustrations "clipped and pasted by the author" and composed "voluntarily . . . as a surprise for Papa." As the publication information makes clear, Gracie's text **would not exist** (at least in published form) without the adult intervention and appropriation of the author's father. And "Papa" turns out to be the book's publisher, George Coolidge, a well-known Boston job printer of Almanacs and gift books. The back of the envelope, which holds the text, reprints numerous newspaper reviews of Grace's little tale (still more evidence of her father's publishing connections). As the reviews stress, what makes Gracie's tale significant is its

¹ Thank you to Laura Wasowicz for introducing me to this extraordinary artifact.

very childishness. (Of the five reviews in Boston newspapers I have tracked down,² all emphasize the “miniature” size of the text, the author’s young age, and the fact that her childish punctuation and spelling have been “preserve[d]”; and while all but one name George Coolidge as the publisher, only one reviewer bothered to mention the child writer by name.)

The questions raised by these material forms of publication are fascinating. For starters, who is Gracie Coolidge and what led her to write such a tale? If, as the envelope announces, this text was “voluntarily” authored as a “surprise” for her father, then what do we make of the fact that her story’s printing and dissemination depend on his professional connections and expertise? What does the reproduction of this original story by an eight-year-old girl, complete with contemporary newspaper reviews, suggest about the 19th-century impulse to preserve and publish children’s writing?

Although all these questions could lead to fruitful inquiries, two questions most interest me today. First, what does the story itself—its combination of the formulaic and unexpected, the singularly imagined and the “childish”—tell us about children’s agency and voice? Second, how can we interpret signs of agency and voice in children’s writing when so many forms of print publishing reinforced their precarious social positioning?

In Grace’s case, evidence of the dependence of the child writer on adult modes of publishing continues into the linguistic features of her text. In many respects Gracie’s tale imitates one of the most standard conservative storylines of nineteenth-century juvenile literature—the damsel in distress in need of rescue. Yet, the actual subject of this

² These reviews appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, *The Christian Era*, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, *The Nation*, and *The Banner of Light*.

narrative tale—the King’s Daughter—plays a small role and remains unnamed. As Gracie’s story goes, the daughter of a king is somehow vaguely endangered and then becomes the object the male prince strives to rescue. While the king and prince also go without personal names, they are known by their *own rank and title* (indicative of their individual social status) whereas the female characters of the witch (who sets the traps that imprison the king’s daughter) and the princess are defined by *their relationship with men* and by *their primal association with feminine evil or goodness*. In this manner, Gracie’s plot line suggests the ways that young girls internalized linguistic practices and certain gender norms, even those that rendered them most vulnerable and powerless.

Yet Gracie makes some surprising revisions that crisscross and challenge these more predictable conservative threads. Hers is almost entirely a story of conflict rather than simple traditional romance. That is, the various vague “traps” that must be navigated to save the king’s daughter become THE STORY. The repeated emphasis on the actions—found on page five—including wandering, seeking, knocking, and doors flying open—not only define the quest: they are the quest. The drama—of the daring, the risking, the rescuing, and the triumphing of wit over evil—matters most, regardless of the gender of either the victim or the rescuer.

The denouement of the story also registers in unexpected ways. The last lines read: “And he [the prince] did not stumble into it [unnamed trap] then he went to the princes [sic] and he wined her. And they lived very long” (6). On the one hand, the run-on sentences, misspellings, and unconventional punctuation reinforce the child’s position as a semi-literate apprentice “practicing for print,” to borrow Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s phrase. On the other hand, though, these textual moves challenge all readers—child and

adult alike—to read the composition in new ways. To decode Gracie’s tale means reading speculatively as we strive to make sense of unfamiliar syntactic codes and a grammar at odd angles with our own. In the end, the character in need of rescue by the prince materializes as—P-R-I-N-C-E-S—the male plural—rather than princess—P-R-I-N-C-E-S-S—the singular feminine subject. Thus, the final lines announce the survival of *either* two male princes and/or a prince and princess (both misspelled). And their flourishing depends—as it so rarely does in stereotypical “once upon a time” time—on their remaining side by side, alive but still unbound by the legal constraints of marriage.

This final gesture toward autonomy finds confirmation in the illustrations framing the text. Both feature a girl alone—first with a doll, and then at the end on her knees as if in prayer. The lone girls flanking the text, while drawn in generic stock images that George Coolidge probably had on hand, vividly complicate the conservative story of a girl’s need for a boy to rescue her. One image of a girl with a doll, and another with a girl posed in prayer, prosaic though they might be, gesture toward self-initiated actions. Both drive home a “happily ever after” found in girls’ own imagination, play, and spirituality—like that represented by the text itself.

While few child writers like Gracie C. had a job printer for a father, the example of Rebecca Leaming proves that even a well-worn composition book may yield resplendent evidence of children’s original story worlds. When readers open the handstitched, cardboard covers of Leaming’s book, we come face to face with the watercolor sketch of an elaborately dressed woman, whose hairstyle is as large and menacing as the weapon she wields. Leaming captions her vivid illustration—“FRONTISPIECE”—while inscribing her authorship, publication date, and the title of her 72-page fantasy “The

Cousins” on the facing page. Through this extraordinary illustration and self-fashioned title page, Rebbly initiates her own take on the pervasive paratexts of print publishing: signaling “the undefined zone” between the “inside” of her book (and the worlds it contains) and the world “outside” of her text (Genette 107).

While her notebook contains a few other items, including a short tale about a factory girl turned action hero, along with some practice drawings of a hatchet and a shopping list, this title page frames an incredibly original and well-sustained fantasy narrative, which can best be described as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* meets Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. In a nutshell: a family is shipwrecked. The husbands/fathers and one unlucky oldest daughter drown (the men do have good manners and wave goodbye to their families before the “water covers them”). However, the two wives (who are also sisters) and their four daughters make it safely to an unnamed uninhabited island. On the island, the mothers’ and daughters’ survival depends on the girls—the four cousins, ages four to fifteen—becoming female adventure heroes. Their survival also depends on their managing to create from scratch a comfortable middle-class parlor (completed just nine days after landing), which Rebbly portrays in an illustration at the end of chapter one.

Rather than sustain a detailed plot summary of Rebbly’s fantasy, which blurs and bends many gender norms and genre conventions, my focus today is on the text’s intricate watercolors, which drive and elevate her fascinating adventure to a remarkable level. The exquisite details of her illustrations—such as “Mrs. Emerson’s Parlor”—demonstrate Rebbly’s deep awareness of the powerful visuality of the mainstream nineteenth-century press. After readers take in detailed descriptions of the women and girls securing provisions and building their own home (with the help of a few other useful

survivors, including a glazier who makes the windows), chapter one culminates with an image of the crucial, tastefully decorated parlor. Through careful integration of word and image, the text sets up the suspense while the image amplifies what has just been narrated. In this manner, Rebbly enacts in her text what scholar Gigi Barnhill describes as, the “power [of illustrations] to excite the reader’s imagination, reinforce and interpret the text, [and] dramatize the narrative’s emotional content.” (4)

Besides this unlikely but arresting nineteenth-century parlor, however, the entirety of Rebbly’s illustrations visualize a fantastic, colorful cast of giants, witches, and mean fairies, all of whom threaten the girls’ survival. For example, chapter two opens with a small, ugly woman who magically drops from the chimney after the girls’ mothers fall ill. The crone first appears helpful, telling them of a secret elixir to save their sick mothers (which is an herb called “Arthing”). When the youngest cousin calls her “ma’am,” however, the woman becomes irate. And rather than telling the girls where the life-saving herb can be found, she gives them a sharp etiquette lesson on why they “shouldn’t be ma’aming” her but rather address her by her title “madam.”

Later, the text describes the girls coming face to face with a menacing giant, just as they are securing the medicinal herb, Arthing. At the very moment of this narrative encounter, with the turn of the page, the ogre is pictured (and labeled), complete with gigantic nose, swollen lips, and engorged eyes. The enormity of the giant’s visage, which takes up the entire illustrated page, accentuates the creature’s threats, which are detailed by the narrative. The Giant initially tries to cajole the cousins into staying in his tree home, telling them he will keep them safe (all the while, naturally, fattening them up to eat). When the girls foil his plot (through some savvy spy work) and fall into a tunnel

seventy feet under the ground, he proceeds to try to dig them out with his sinister elongated arm (twenty feet from shoulder to wrist) and later with a giant, expandable pitchfork. This careful sequencing of menacing actions, detailed in word and image, culminates with the giant's mysterious name being revealed: "E-A-T-E-M-U-P." Thus, his name sums up the threat he embodies, which the characters and readers learned to "read" as his true nature.

Of course, the villainous archetypes of Rebbly's text and illustrations are not entirely original. They bear some resemblance to other knife-wielding female nemeses or bulbous-nosed giants from popular nursery reading.³ Through the text's exaggerated visible display of the ogres, however, Rebbly also alludes to the real suspense of young girls' experiences navigating a series of often mean, authoritarian figures that they must learn to read and outwit. And just as notably, Rebbly's heroines are never illustrated and thus made spectacle for the reader's gaze. Her focus is clearly not on the girls' beauty or innocence nor on the "virtue rewarded" plots of the pervasive didactic literature and Sunday school books aimed at children in general and girls in particular. Instead, anticipating late-nineteenth-century boys' adventure heroes by a few decades, these girls function as a team, whose survival, while marred by individual vices and peccadilloes, foregrounds the heroines becoming nimble, skilled readers of the duplicitous authorities standing between them and the "Arthing," the holy grail of their quest.

I conclude by returning to the two images of the authors of the texts we've considered. On the left, Rebecca Leaming sits reading to her younger sister Mary, or

³ My thanks to Laura Wasowicz for helping track down these images.

Mame, in the parlor of her Villanova, Pennsylvania home during the same year she composed “The Cousins.” On the right, Gracie Coolidge Pennepacker appears as a forty-something mother sturdily holding her twins, with a single shoe dropped in the corner perhaps alluding to a son who had passed away the year prior.⁴ What I am still working out, and would love input on, is how the writing these creative authors composed as children complicates the subjects and subjectivities represented in the photographs. I have some thoughts along these lines, which I am happy to discuss in the Q and A, but I am especially curious about how the story worlds these girls composed might animate and deepen our viewing of the young woman and the mature mother pictured here.

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⁴ My thanks to Nan Wolverton and Lauren Hewes for pointing out this visual trope.

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