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Women, Literary Annuals, and the Evidence of Inscriptions

PAULA R. FELDMAN

THE LITERARY ANNUALS of the 1820s, '30s, and '40s were best sellers and are, thus, a remarkable index to the taste and popular culture of Britain during this period. They offer important clues, as well, to the interconnected worlds of women writers and their readers, for they include poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction works by important figures, such as Mary Shelley, Letitia Landon, Mary Howitt, Felicia Hemans, Caroline Norton, and the Countess of Blessington, as well as lesser-known authors, such as Emma Roberts, Maria Jane Jewsbury, and Agnes Strickland.¹ While male writers, such as Thomas Campbell, Allan Cunningham, Bernard Barton, John Clare and Alaric A. Watts were frequent contributors, and works by canonical male authors, such as Walter Scott, S. T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, appeared in literary annuals, they were one of the main venues for women authors. For many, including Hemans, Shelley, Roberts, Jewsbury, and others, the annuals provided a major source of funds as well as significant literary exposure. Others, such as Norton, Blessington, Landon, and Howitt, not only contributed but became editors, thereby insuring a steady, lucrative income and becoming some of the first women to take up this mantle. The relatively high number of women authors and editors shaped the character of these volumes and accounted, in part, for the way in which the literary establishment took to disparaging them. But others dismissed literary annuals, because they feared that their own book sales were in danger of being suppressed by their popularity. Robert Southey, for example, complained, "The Annuals are now the only books bought for presents to young ladies, in which way poems formerly had their chief vent. People ask for what is new."² Even so, literary annuals represented such a sizable portion of the book market that they could not be easily ignored.³

Their readership is widely believed to have been middle-class young women of marriageable age, and their purchasers are thought to have often been their

1. Recent scholarship that has shaped our view of the history of reading Romantic-era books include William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press [2004]); and Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

2. 8 Dec. 1828 in *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, 6 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1849-50), VI, 463.

3. For more information on literary annuals, see my historical and critical introduction to the recent Broadview facsimile of *The Keepsake for 1829*, pp. i-xxvi, which also includes a bibliography of secondary materials, along with useful Internet resources.

suitors. But these assumptions, like so much else about Romantic literary culture, have remained unexamined. Documentary evidence exists, however, that provides concrete evidence, never before considered, of who the readers of these annuals were, who their purchasers were, and what the market for these volumes actually was.

The physical appearance of the volumes provides some clues. Annuals were crafted as beautifully as it was possible to make books in their day. They came bound in silk, pictorial paper boards or tooled leather, and sported leaves edged in gilt. By modern standards, these books were extraordinarily expensive, selling for between eight shillings and four pounds, depending upon the binding and the quality and size of the paper. They were published each October or November, expressly for the holiday season, and were titled to suggest value and beauty: *The Gem*, *The Pearl*, *The Amethyst*, *The Bijou*, *The Amulet*. Their names were often designed to reflect their import within a relationship: *Forget Me Not*, *The Remembrance*, and *Friendship's Offering*. Many had an elaborately engraved or embossed presentation page, with space for a personalized inscription from purchaser to recipient.

Clearly such a gift had special significance. To understand it more fully, historians have looked to commentators such as the Reverend S. D. Burchard, an American, who explained in 1845: "When we find [a literary annual] on the center and parlour tables of our kindred and friends, we know that in every such family are the loved and valued."⁴

An anonymous "Introduction: Addressed to the Ladies," published in *The Offering* for 1834, described the social meaning of an annual as a physical memento of desire or intimacy:

And when from the husband, the lover, or friend,
 You receive, as a proof of affection,
 The Offering, oh, say what emotions must blend
 With the gift, and cement the connection!

And how sweet, as you turn o'er its pages, to think
 Such love as you there see depicted,
 In large copious draughts, you, too, freely may drink,
 Nor by judgment nor conscience restricted.

A wry commentator for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* observed in a review of *The Literary Souvenir* for 1825:

Do you wish to give a small earnest graceful gift to some dearly-beloved one, then thank us for the happy hint, and with a kiss, or, if that be not yet per-

4. "Annuals" in the *Laurel Wreath* (Hartford: S. Andrus & Son, 1845), p. 9.

missible, at least with a smile of severest suavity . . . lay the Literary Souvenir upon her tender lap, with a very few words, which it would be impertinent in us to particularize; only be sure “you breathe them not far from her delicate auricle;” and with a low, a deep, and pleading tone, like the knight who won the bright and beauteous Genevieve. It is a hundred to one that you are a married man in six weeks or two months; nay if it be a “large paper copy” one flesh will ye be before the new moon.⁵

Contemporary commentary such as this, along with the physical appearance of many volumes, would seem to suggest that annuals were chiefly courtship presents. As such, they have not been thought to deserve attention as serious literary works.

But the hand-written inscriptions found within the pages of these volumes, both on the specially designed presentation plates and elsewhere, challenge these assumptions with concrete evidence found nowhere else. To try to understand more about their cultural and social significance, I examined a private collection of 354 British literary annuals, published between 1824 and 1859, most during the 1820s and 1830s, whose inscriptions I recorded and analyzed. Research concerning these artifacts of nineteenth-century popular culture is complicated by the fact that, for the most part, until recently, libraries did not collect and preserve them. Few public institutions, even now, have seen fit to include them in their holdings. While the consciousness of the collector can always be said to skew what a collection contains, the one I examined was assembled over the course of many decades from a large number of sources in several countries. There are no complete matched sets, and few of the volumes are in pristine condition. Most volumes had been owned by individuals, although a few had been de-accessioned by institutional libraries. Whether they were inscribed or not was not a consideration for the collector. Thus, this collection would seem to be a fairly representative sample.

Those volumes that contain inscriptions are especially valuable to the scholar, for they often document the genders of the recipient and the giver as well as the occasion and date of the gift; sometimes they contain information indicating the relationship between the recipient and the giver. Thus, inscriptions provide documentary evidence of who the readers of these annuals were, who their purchasers were, and what the market and social function of these volumes actually was.

What percentage of these volumes were inscribed? As Appendix 1 shows, only about forty percent of the volumes in this sample had any sort of inscription—defined broadly to include even simple ownership signatures.

5. (January 1825), p. 94.

Admittedly, this sample is suspect in the way that archival evidence often is. Were inscribed copies more or less likely to have been preserved for nearly two centuries? Was the collector more or less likely to have purchased inscribed as opposed to “clean” copies sometimes preferred by booksellers? That is to say, the extent to which the sample is skewed is unclear. However, despite its limitations, this is, so far, the best evidence available.

Some titles seem more likely to have been inscribed than others. For example, *The Literary Souvenir* and *Friendship's Offering* apparently had much higher rates of inscription than the norm, while the *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook*, a large, quarto volume, and *The Bijou* appear to be inscribed less often than the norm.

Who owned these volumes? Sometimes inscriptions give no information about gender. Handwriting can be difficult to read or obscured by later owners. Initials were frequently used in place of full names by both men and women, making gender, in those cases, difficult or impossible to determine. Even so, 106 of the sample volumes contain evidence of the owner's gender, either through a gift inscription, a signature, or a bookplate. Of these, 73 percent were owned by females and a surprisingly high 27 percent were owned by males. That one in four literary annuals in this sample was in the possession of males calls into question our assumption of an audience consisting almost entirely of young ladies.

Who were the purchasers of literary annuals? That is to say, who gave them as gifts? Annuals appear to have been sold or resold long after their original publication date, so I eliminated from the sample all inscriptions obviously written after 1880. Often the gender of only the giver or the recipient could be determined. But for thirty-four of the volumes, the gender of both giver and recipient are clear. Interestingly, while males gave twenty annuals in the sample to females, females gave nine volumes to other females. More than a quarter of these annuals were given by females—a surprisingly high ratio considering what we thought we knew. There was only one case in which a female gave an annual to a male, and that was a teacher who gave a copy of *Friendship's Offering* for 1842 to a student. The inscription is written in French, so this example may not reflect English culture. In any case, it would seem to have been permissible for a male to have given a female a literary annual and for a female to have given another female a literary annual, but the evidence suggests that it was *not* permissible for a female to have given an adult male one of these volumes. Interestingly, four volumes were given by males to other males. Two of these, however, were presentation copies from the editors. Five of the volumes were awarded as school prizes—another function never considered in the critical literature.

Analysis of inscription content, which discloses the relationship of the giver

and the recipient, reveals that these volumes did not serve primarily as aids to courtship, although they performed that function on occasion. Literary annuals appear to have been purchased much more often as gifts between family members. While it is not unusual to find an inscription such as that written in a copy of *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook* for 1839: "To Miss Delia Ray by her friend Henry A. Dunning," it is far more common to find inscriptions between siblings, or from parents to daughters, from aunts and uncles to nieces, and from husbands to wives. Some of the most poignant are testaments, in fact, to familial rather than to romantic love. For example, "A tribute of parting affection from James Brown to his sister Anne on her wedding day, Feb[ruar]y 10th 1829" appears in *The Keepsake* for 1829; "Mary Banister as a memorial of her late Aunt's love by her affectionate uncle James Bisset" is penned in a copy of *The Pledge of Friendship* for 1826. Within the sample, twenty-five volumes can be identified as gifts among family members, while only four seem to have been given by an unrelated male to a female. Even adding to this number the six volumes signed with initials or from "a friend," which may or may not have been a suitor, family far outnumber suitors as givers of annuals.

The sample used for these results was too small to make this any more than a preliminary study. For definitive answers, many more examples of inscriptions in literary annuals should be examined—a task complicated by the difficulty of finding large collections of these volumes. But this study *was* large enough to serve as a cautionary tale about the foolhardiness of taking at face value nineteenth-century anecdotal evidence about literary culture. In this case, we failed, it seems, to appreciate the capacity of nineteenth-century commentators for irony, humor and exaggeration.

The high cost of literary annuals may have determined, more than any other factor, the relationship between giver and recipient. That same high cost may have made such a present from a suitor seem all that more serious. Moreover, we know now that annuals served as wedding-day mementos, school prizes and as gifts between men. But, to me, one of the most intriguing findings of this admittedly preliminary study is the large number of uninscribed volumes—sixty percent. While some of these clean copies may have been remainder volumes, and, therefore, not sold until well after their date of production, most would seem to have been purchased, not as gifts from one person to another at all but as personal copies to have been read and enjoyed by their purchasers and, perhaps then, to have been set out on the drawing room table as a token of sincere affection.

APPENDIX 1

Title	#	# inscribed	% inscribed
<i>The Amulet</i>	20	06	30
<i>The Bijou</i>	11	03	27
<i>Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook</i>	22	04	18
<i>Forget Me Not</i>	40	16	40
<i>Friendship's Offering</i>	20	11	55
<i>Heath's Book of Beauty</i>	23	08	35
<i>The Keepsake</i>	64	26	41
<i>The Literary Souvenir</i>	36	20	56
<i>The Winter's Wreath</i>	11	05	45
Other Titles	107	41	38
Total	354	140	40

Of the 106 volumes whose owner's gender can be determined, either through a gift inscription, a signature or a bookplate, 77 volumes were owned by females (or 73 percent) as compared to 29 owned by males (or 27 percent).

Volumes Given As Gifts	43
Given by Males	32
Given by Females	11

Volumes Given As School Prizes 05

Volumes with Known Gender of Giver and Recipient	34
From males to females	20 + 6 suspected males
From females to males	01 (to a child)
From females to females	09
From males to males	04

APPENDIX 2

Inscriptions Written before 1880: Genders known

Female to Female (9)

Forget Me Not, n.d. [1841 or later]:

“To Rose by her Affectionate Mother N. Mortimer.”

Heath's Book of Beauty for 1846:

“A Souvenir of Love from M. E. to her dearest and best of sisters”

The Keepsake for 1835:

“Mary Spotswoode January 1st 1835 from her affectionate sister R. Frances Robertson.”

The Keepsake for 1840:

“Miss Gegney the gift of her Sister F Gigney June 1846”

The Winter's Wreath for 1828:

“Jane Eliza Williamson from her affectionate Mother”

The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not for 1829:

“Beatrice Percival from her Mother”

The Winter's Wreath for 1829:

“Clara's book 1st of January 1836 Given by Lady Attley Guy's
Thanks 2–8 Nugent Street”

The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not for 1829:

“Luanda My dear from her Aunt L. I. Wood”

The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not for 1833:

“Catherine Anne Byden from her Aunt C. S. Wood”

Male to Male (4)

(two are presentation copies from editors and one is for a child)

The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not for 1831:

“To James R. Hunter from his dear brother Andrew Tom Rothsay
1831”

The Bijou for 1830:

“Horatio Edw[ar]d Davis a new year's gift for 1835 from Lemuel”

The Amulet, ed. S. C. Hall 1834, presentation copy:

“Alex. Fraser Esq with S. C. Hall's best regards & sincere thanks”

The Literary Souvenir for 1829, presentation copy from the editor to Charles
Rolls, who engraved two of the plates within:

“Charles Rolls Esq from his Friend Alaric A. Watts”

Male to Female—Family (16)

Husband to Wife (3)

The Anniversary, or Prose and Poetry for 1829:

“To Mary Best on her wedding day from Nathaniel Best”

The Bijou for 1830:

“for Carolina Warner from her husband”

Forget Me Not for 1825:

“Jane Boyd from her Husband”

Brother to Sister (7)

Forget Me Not for 1826:

“E. R. Parker from her affectionate brother I. F. Parker”

Friendship's Offering, and Winter's Wreath for 1836:

“Ann E. Brown from her brother”

The Keepsake for 1829:

“A tribute of parting affection from James Brown to his sister Anne on her wedding day. Feby 10th 1829”

The Literary Souvenir for 1833:

“Harriott S. Girardot from her affectionate brother John”

The Literary Souvenir for 1834:

“Caroline Baldwin Salem” on front free endpaper and “G.W. to his Sister Caroline January 1835”

The Winter's Wreath for 1829:

“A present to Elizabeth B. Rose from her brother Joseph D. Schofield Oct. 30th 1851”

The New Year's Gift and Juvenile Souvenir for 1829:

“This book was presented to Susan Ackers Cooper by her affectionate Brother”

Father to Daughter (3)

Forget Me Not for 1828:

“Sally Holley given to her by her father”

Forget Me Not for 1837:

“My daughter Sarah by her affectionate father Tho[ma]s Naylor”

Forget Me Not for 1839:

“my affectionate Daughter Sarah—Tho[ma]s Naylor”

Uncle to Niece (3)

The Juvenile Forget-Me-Not for 1831:

“The gift of Uncle James to Emma Pratt Barlow Novr 30th 1830”

The Landscape Wreath, ed. Thomas Campbell, presentation copy:

“To Mary Campbell from her affectionate uncle Tho[ma]s Campbell—”

The Pledge of Friendship for 1826:

“Mary Banister as a memorial of her late Aunt's love by her affectionate uncle James Bisset”

Apparently Unrelated Male to Female (4)

Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook for 1836 with Poetical Illustrations by L. E. L.:

“Susan Mary Aldersey from Stanley Place 1839”

Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook for 1839, with poetical illustrations by L.E.L.:

“To Miss Delia Ray by her friend Henry A. Dunning”

Heath's Book of Beauty for 1833:

“Lillian Ritchie from Mr. Green Xmas 1872”

The Literary Souvenir for 1825:

“To Miss Almey Gilford from her friend Edward Biddle”

Apparently Unrelated Suspected Male to Female (6)*Forget Me Not* for 1831:

"To Miss Eliza Reshon with the sincere regards of a Real Friend"

Forget Me Not for 1838:

"To Miss S. Cook as a small testimony of respect from her sincere friend y"

The Comic Offering for 1833:

"Miss Eliz. Ann Marshall from her friend W. Leary October 1833"

The English Annual for 1838:

"To Miss S. Smith from a Senecan friend. A. G."

The Gem for 1832:

"Katherine Margaret Mansel 18 Oct. 1832 from her affectionate friend E. G."

The Provincial Souvenir for 1846:

"Jane Elueslie From a Friend Oct. 1847 Edinburgh"

Female to Male (1)*Friendship's Offering* for 1842:"1er prix donné à E. Weedon par son amie H. Dubosh
Le 20 Decembre 1844"

APPENDIX 3

School Prize Books (5)*The Keepsake* for 1838:

"The reward of merit—from The Rev. Robert Gream to his young Friend and Pupil . . . 1838."

The New Year's Gift; and Juvenile Souvenir for 1831:

"To Aaron Hill The first, best in Arithmetic exercises in Composition & cyphering Books 2nd best in Geography, Parsing English & Orthography. Aug[u]st 1834"

The Pearl; a Juvenile Forget-Me-Not, and Pledge of Friendship n.d. but before 1853:

"Miss Annie Lloyd Second Class Prize June 16th 1853"

Friendship's Offering for 1842:"1er prix donné à E. Weedon par son amie H. Dubosh
Le 20 Decembre 1844"*The Tribute of Affection* n.d. but c. late 1830s:

"A reward for attention to her studies and general good conduct, presented to Jane Ford by her attached Instructor. G. E. Atchinson Aug[u]st 1st 1847"