2010

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The “Almanacks” of Mary Moody Emerson: A Scholarly Digital Edition

Noelle A. Baker and Sandra Harbert Petrulionis

Born in Concord, Massachusetts, on the eve of the American Revolution, Mary Moody Emerson (1774–1863) is most widely known today as the brilliant aunt of American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). She was, however, an exciting figure in her own right: a scholar, a theologian, a proto-feminist, and an author whose writings offer a rare and prolific example of early American women’s intellectual production (see Figure 1). In 1804, when she was thirty, and again in her seventies, Emerson published a handful of periodical essays.\(^1\) But her most significant literary accomplishment is an unpublished series of manuscript “Almanacks” (c. 1804–1855), a miscellany spanning over one-thousand pages and fifty years, and whose generic form derives from the commonplace book, devotional diary, and epistolary essay. Constructed from loose sheets of letter paper bound with thread, individual Almanacks were circulated among friends and correspondents, as single sheets with letters or as multiple-leaved gifts. These writings reflect Emerson’s immersion in Eastern and Western as well as classical, Enlightenment, and Romantic thought, and they offer perhaps the most complete literary example documenting a single, intellectual woman’s life during the antebellum era. Yet the complete text of these manuscripts has never been readily available.

Unlike many early American women’s manuscripts that have not survived, the Almanacks likely exist today because of their unique history and proximity to Waldo Emerson, who not only inherited the original documents, but who

throughout his life also excerpted Mary Emerson’s letters and Almanacks in his own journals, resulting in three formal and indexed “MME Notebooks” culled from the Almanacks, all of which we have also transcribed. Although Waldo prized this legacy, the Almanacks’ history reads like a near fatality. In 1872, his Concord home caught fire, severely damaging and massively disordering the manuscripts. Eventually, in 1901–1902 the Emerson family hired archival scholar and Concord historian George Tolman to transcribe them, but both Mary Emerson’s originals and his fair-hand copies were eventually relegated to uncatalogued storage at Harvard University’s Houghton Library.

In 1999, at the Thoreau Society’s Annual Gathering in Concord, we heard Emerson scholar Phyllis Cole convey her excitement at locating the Almanacks in the basement of the Houghton in 1980. As she describes it, this pivotal discovery had transformed Cole’s work-in-progress, published in 1998 as Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism; along with Nancy Craig Simmons’s selected edition of Mary Emerson’s correspondence, Cole establishes Waldo Emerson’s intellectual debt to his aunt and identifies the centrality of the Almanacks in grounding this relationship. Thanks to Cole and Simmons’s groundbreaking work, Emerson is now considered a precursor to the major figures of Transcendentalism, a woman whose literary life and writing bridge the intellectual cultures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, in Modern Library’s recent anthology The American Transcendentalists, excerpts from Mary Emerson’s prose comprise the first entry in the first chapter, “Anticipations.”

Because of our experience working on Thoreau’s journal for The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, and our scholarly interests in Transcendentalism and nineteenth-century American women’s writings, editing the Almanacks of Mary Moody Emerson seemed a compelling project. Regrettably, since her death in 1863, the greater status of her famous nephew’s literary reputation and the fragile state of the manuscripts have each contributed to a profound mischaracterization of her life’s work. Time and institutional archival practices have privileged Waldo’s more legible but highly selective and occasionally inaccurate transcriptions of his aunt’s writings as primary source materials, while the complete

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2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals and Notebooks, 1820–1880 (MS Am 1280H: 147–149), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3 According to Edward W. Forbes, Tolman transcribed Mary Emerson’s Almanacks in 1901 and 1902 (“Preface,” George Tolman, Mary Moody Emerson [Cambridge: Privately printed, 1929], n.p.).


Figure 1: Recently deposited at the Houghton Library, this is the only known extant image of Mary Moody Emerson, taken posthumously, and identified on the reverse of the tintype in an unknown hand: “Mary Moody Emerson the aunt of R. Waldo Emerson—who had such a marked influence on his religious life.” 2008M-92 (6), folder G1, Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
Figure 2: bMS Am 1280.235 (385 [folder 35, p. 422]). Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
Figure 3: bMS Am 1280.235 (385 [folder 22, p. 378]). Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
Figure 4: bMS Am 1280.235 (385 [folder 22, p. 302]). Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
Figure 5: bMS Am 1280.235 (385 [folder 9, pp. 499-500]). Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
Figure 6: bMS Am 1280.235 (385 [folder 40, p. 471]). Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association deposit, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without permission.
A lm anacks remain virtually unread. As a result, we were particularly eager to re-
store Mary Emerson’s authentic voice.

When we began in 2002 our initial objective was a print volume, but we
soon recognized that both the length and fragmentary nature of this largely un-
dated and unpaginated manuscript series would necessitate a selected edition.
Despite several fine recent publications of women’s private writings, few such ex-
tensively damaged manuscript archives of early American women’s intellectual
self-cultivation are extant and accessible; thus, no genuinely comparable edition
could serve as a model for our organizing framework, editorial decisions, and tex-
tual quandaries, many of which derived from the disarray of the manuscripts and
the variants between scribal witness transcriptions. Fortunately, we have benefit-
ted from the knowledge and advice of fellow editors—Ronald A. Bosco, Helen
Deese, Robert N. Hudspeth, Joel Myerson, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell, as well
as from Emerson’s biographer, Phyllis Cole, who serves as an advisor to our proj-
ect and whose wealth of knowledge about Emerson, her family, and her
milieu has been invaluable to our initial work.

After considering various possibilities, we have ultimately decided on a
digital edition of the complete Almanacks, to be published by the Brown Women
Writers Project (WWP) in its highly regarded database of early modern women’s
writing, Women Writers Online (WWO). During early discussions of our op-
tions, Kenneth Price, Andrew Jewell, and Amy Earhart, leaders of the newly or-
ganized Digital Americanists, urged us to explore a partnership with established
electronic archives and databases whose archival stability and directors’ technical
expertise would help ensure the success and durability of our editorial work. We
have discovered repeatedly that the advice of experienced professionals is crucial
for textual scholars who lack working knowledge of this new media. Significantly,
in such an edition, as opposed to print, we can make available all extant Al-
amanacks, and we can add manuscript leaves indefinitely as they are located over
time. Moreover, the fluidity of this searchable hypertext allows us to adhere to
rigorous editorial standards even as it provides innovative—even elegant—possi-
bilities for presenting the materiality and complexity of this extraordinary
woman’s text.

WWP is one of the longest-running projects in the digital humanities,
with an established history of research and publication on text encoding and the
representation of complex primary source materials. Emerson’s Almanacks are
functioning as a pilot document for its recent commitment to develop procedures
and Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) specifications to support collaborative editorial
projects. Thus far, with the guidance of WWP Director Julia Flanders, and
Senior Programmer Syd Bauman, we have developed an initial set of encoding
standards, including practices for representing textual notes, emendations, regu-
larization, annotations, and the manuscripts' physical description. In all cases, we are following TEI Guidelines but are also determining precisely at what level of detail to apply them, preserving the possibility that a more complex markup may later be added, depending on the specific digital publication goals that evolve for WWP manuscript collections. Each line of text will be uniquely identified, allowing for topical sections throughout the manuscript to be linked and cross-referenced to similar passages. The conceptual power of this encoding approach makes possible a variety of interfaces and editorial presentations while preserving options for how the text is ultimately displayed. Scribal witness transcriptions, normalized abbreviations, emended readings, and textual notes describing damage all can be displayed or suppressed as convenient to the reader (as pop-ups or marginal notes, for instance).

Our foremost objective with this first complete edition of the Almanacks is to reveal the achievement and character of Mary Emerson, whose core reputation as Waldo Emerson's aunt has over the past century and a half unfortunately overshadowed her participation in a transatlantic culture sustained by and celebrated in the reading and writing practices of many British and American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a foundational text in WWO, Emerson’s Almanacks will enrich the works of other women writers; together, they will reach over 250 subscribing institutions and, we envision, be regularly used for research and teaching. As an added benefit, publishing the Almanacks in this database will broaden the audience that they might have enjoyed in a print edition, since scholars interested in early modern British women’s writings will happen on Emerson in the process of keyword searches, especially given the inclusion of many devotional texts similar to hers in WWO.

A digital edition also helps us address two of our greatest challenges: the Almanacks’ lack of chronology or pagination, and their extensive damage—resulting from fire, water, and mildew, often all three on a given leaf. Nearly every page contains missing words; the edges of most leaves are brittle and crumbling, with the first and last words of most lines on a page often irrecoverable (see Figures 2 and 3). Added to this lost text are the complicating facts that Emerson rarely or idiosyncratically dated her entries, and like many a New Englander she

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6 A trial demonstration of our edition, based on a twelve-page excerpt from the Almanacks, can be accessed at <http://www.personal.psu.edu/shp2/sample_pointer_page.xhtml>.

7 WWO currently holds numerous published works of meditation and prayer, spiritual tracts, and religious histories, including, for example, Hannah Adams’s The History of the Jews from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the Nineteenth Century (1812), Jarena Lee’s The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee (1836), Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s Friendship in Death (1728), and Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773). The complete list of WWO texts can be accessed at <http://www.wwp.brown.edu/texts/textlist.author.html>.
never wasted a scrap of paper, writing on the same leaf at various times (see Figure 4), sometimes but not always in a different direction. Further, because Emerson dispersed portions of the Almanacks with her correspondence, we are still actively recovering individual leaves that have been misfiled as letters at the Houghton Library and other institutions. Although her composition process sheds interesting light on the material culture of Emerson’s manuscripts, it creates tremendous challenges of representation and organization for the editor. Moreover, most Almanacks have been dismembered and are now encapsulated in protective mylar as single leaves, obliging us to reconstruct their original binding and order within the individual fascicles by identifying common water marks and the traces of Emerson’s practice of fascicle making, such as needle marks and thread stains or remnants. In a few instances, sewn booklets do remain for us to examine, as with a relatively undamaged fifty-six page intact example bound in brown thread, which Emerson gave to her intimate friend Elizabeth Hoar in April 1827 (see Figure 5).

As described earlier, two scribal witness transcriptions of the Almanacks are extant: a partial one made in the mid-nineteenth century by Waldo Emerson, which includes roughly one third of the Almanacks, and a nearly complete one produced by George Tolman in 1901–1902. Because both men had access to more complete and legible manuscripts than exist today, we are obligated to report their readings, especially since their transcriptions supply text now missing or damaged. At times, however, both Waldo Emerson and Tolman inaccurately render Mary Emerson’s words, and they occasionally posit different readings for the same passage, variations easily displayed in digital media that will offer rich interpretive material for scholars. Finally, our edition of this complex series of manuscripts will clarify the ways in which the Almanacks were preserved and dispersed, as both an amalgam of private authorial and scribal witness documents and as an influential component of the public talks, sermons, poems, and essays in which Waldo Emerson employed Mary Emerson’s fiery language and unconventional ideas.

An additional and exciting advantage of digital media is that all available transcriptions can be overlaid so that we are not selecting one reading as primary and reporting the others in the back matter. Other potential innovations include a “personography” and subject bibliography, bio-bibliographical information that will, along with our annotations, illustrate the people, texts, and events that populate Mary Emerson’s Almanacks. Similarly, although as previously noted Emerson rarely dated her manuscripts, contextual information will enable us to encode many entries with their correct date, time of day, month, and year in an optional display that provides alternative ways for readers to search and analyze Emerson’s compositional practices, seasonal tributes to nature, and such religious observations as “appointment day.” As with our display of textual variation, these details
will enhance each reader’s experience of the Almanacks. Importantly, as Jerome McGann suggests, such varied and data-rich interfaces are both “integrated and negotiable” for a range of users with their own needs; they “facilitate many ways of passaging and repassaging” complex documents such as the vast Almanacks. Most exciting, perhaps, these personalized viewing options will empower readers, in McGann’s words, “to understand in our own ways,” without sacrificing the integrity of this multifaceted manuscript.

Indeed, one of the most daunting of this project’s tasks is organizing and annotating the incredible range of Emerson’s intellectual inquiry. The Almanacks’ overriding theme is Emerson’s passionate articulation of selfhood, always defined through an interrogating consciousness seeking connection with a Christian divinity but also delighting in vigorous exploration of other spiritual and scriptural texts, from the Bhagavad Gita to Marcus Aurelius Antonius’s Meditations. Enriching this focus is a deep immersion in the cultures of classical Rome and Greece, Asia, Persia, and Western Europe, interests that led Emerson to read and write widely on a range of subjects considered “masculine” by many of her contemporaries: theology, philosophy, literary criticism, science, war, imperialism, and social reform. Our guiding principle is to make this voluminous commentary intelligible to non-specialist readers, a goal that, again, a digital edition usefully enables. From Plato and Aristotle to David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Isaac Newton, Friedrich Schelling; to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Louis Agassiz and William Wilberforce; to Germaine de Staël, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Margaret Fuller, the Almanacks assemble an astounding range of individuals. Almost ad infinitum, we can identify Emerson’s references and simultaneously link readers to online versions of these sources. In addition to these figures and their corresponding theological, philosophical, and historical subjects that form the staple of nearly every Almanack, our annotations will also encompass the mundane details of Emerson’s everyday life—where and with whom she was boarding at a given time, her frequent travels, her caretaking of ill or dying family members. Another level of annotation will provide cross-references to Waldo Emerson’s prose in order to reveal a more complete understanding of Mary’s intellectual exchanges with and personal guidance to Waldo Emerson, as well his brothers Charles and Edward.10

8 In sporadic Almanack entries, occurring typically but not always on a Saturday, Emerson dedicates herself to self-examination, prayer, and devotional reading. Her own nomenclature, “appointment day,” refers to the notion of Sabbath as one day in seven that is divinely appointed for rest and spiritual consecration.


10 For details of Mary’s relationship with her nephews, see Cole; Simmons; and chapter four in Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
Surveying the field of nineteenth-century women’s writing in 1994, Judith Fetterley described archival recovery and scholarship as a dialectical partnership, an estimation that Karen Kilcup reiterated in 2000. “Criticism and recovery work are two sides of the same scholarly project,” Kilcup observed, adding that anthologies, editions, and “rediscovered writers” “cannot advance, or be taught, without becoming part of a critical conversation.”11 The historiography of the archive illustrates the significance of this “critical conversation” for early American women; during the past two decades, archival discoveries have enabled scholars such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Jane Tompkins, Cathy Davidson, Sharon Harris, Mary Kelley, Carla Mulford, and Susan Stabile to rewrite the early modern narrative for American women.12 In the process, they have transformed a formerly narrow field—consisting largely of Anne Bradstreet, Mary Rowlandson, and Sarah Kemble Knight—into our current discipline, in which increasing abundance and diversity of author, genre, method, and style flourish.13

Evolving standards regarding “literary quality” and “historical significance,” however, have only slowly fostered the interest in and analysis of manuscripts written by women like Emerson, for whom an intellectual miscellany—rather than imaginative fiction or poetry—constitute her primary genre. As textual scholars, therefore, we remain conscious of the necessity to foster this ongoing dialectical partnership between scholarship and archival recovery. To twenty-first-century readers, the socio-historical contexts of the Almanacks may appear as fragmentary as their physical condition, since Emerson engaged in reading and writing cultures whose ephemeral aesthetics and contributions to the public sphere received broader recognition in the early modern period than they


do today. Yet like more canonical American women writers such as Emily Dickinson and the Peabody sisters,\textsuperscript{14} for example, she combined the epistolary form with other genres. And like transatlantic, early modern commonplace-book and letter-book writers such as Milcah Martha Moore and Esther Masham, Emerson considered transcription, arrangement, and interpretation to be creative acts: the means of establishing a personal legacy, commenting on the socio-historical record, and exploring the flexible conventions of manuscript and print production (see Figure 6).\textsuperscript{15}

Projects such as the (Emily) Dickinson Electronic Archives have likewise challenged technology to attend not only to canonical verse, but also to the marginalia of American women authors;\textsuperscript{16} nonetheless, significant questions remain for editors and scholars of early American women’s manuscripts. How should we evaluate the fragmented writings of less celebrated figures? How do their damaged, coded, or only recently accessible texts shed light on the varied traditions of women’s writing? How might emerging theories of digital archival environments enable us to interpret and represent the physical features of Emerson’s manuscripts, their layered scribal witnesses, mixed genres, and nonlinear structure? The material condition of the Almanacks, complicated further by Emerson’s practice of disseminating individual leaves, lends itself well to these and other questions currently being framed by digital humanists.

\textsuperscript{13} Sharon Harris, for instance, movingly describes her discovery as a Master’s student in 1983 that the canon of early American women’s writing was limited to Bradstreet’s poetry, Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, and Knight’s travel diary (Harris, “Introduction,” in \textit{American Women Writers}, 4).

\textsuperscript{14} Salem, Massachusetts sisters Sophia Amelia (1809-1871), Mary Tyler (1806-1887), and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894) are the focus of several recent studies that establish their centrality to literary, social, and political culture in antebellum New England. Elizabeth, who never married, was a Transcendentalist, an author, a feminist, an abolitionist, and a teacher who opened the first kindergarten in America; Sophia, who married Nathaniel Hawthorne, was a talented artist; and Mary, who married Horace Mann, was a teacher, an author, and an abolitionist. See Megan Marshall, \textit{The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Bruce A. Ronda, ed., \textit{The Letters of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: American Renaissance Woman} (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984); and, most recently, Patricia Dunlavy Valenti, \textit{Sophia Peabody Hawthorne: A Life, Vol. 1, 1809-1847} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

\textsuperscript{15} Milcah Martha Moore’s Book, 38, 63–64, 66–69; Susan Wymann, “The Correspondence of Esther Masham and John Locke: A Study in Epistolary Silences,” \textit{The Huntington Library Quarterly} 66.3/4 (2003): 276–78, 290, 297, 300. The Delaware Valley author and coterie writer Milcah Martha Hill Moore (1740-1829) chose the commonplace book as the primary genre for her print publications and manuscript circulation. Her \textit{Miscellanies, Moral and Instructive} (1787-1829) was reprinted in numerous editions for Quaker schoolchildren in Revolutionary America as well as in London and Dublin. A member of the British Protestant gentry, intellectual Esther Masham (1675-1728) created an interpretive history of herself and her family in 1722 by prefacing, transcribing, arranging, and annotating in a manuscript letterbook selected correspondence from her French and British family members, friends, and a notable family intimate, the British philosopher John Locke. Both figures display the varied ways in which early modern women on either side of the Atlantic experimented with authorship, self-expression, and genre.
Marie-Laure Ryan contends that “a truly digital text, or narrative, is one that cannot be transferred into the print medium without significant loss. It depends on the computer as a sustaining environment, and it uses the screen (or any other display device) as a stage for performance.” Ryan points out the ways in which “new media theorists” have shown that “textuality and narrativity” are transformed when viewed as digital productions, and that “unlike books or paintings, digital texts can be refreshed and rewritten,” and thus remain infinitely renewable.17 Importantly, our digital edition will preserve the possibility for upgrades and enhancements such that not only recovered Almanack leaves but new annotations as well can be incorporated within the existing edition. Moreover, future editors could use our XML encoded text as the basis for another generation of hypertext, one that provides a more distinctive interface to readers. After the manner of the interactive Web site for Martha Ballard’s diary,18 for instance, future editors could amplify various cultural contexts of Emerson’s Almanacks—from the legal rights of women as property owners, to the physical experience of and treatment for devastating medical conditions such as erysipelas, from which Emerson suffered throughout her adulthood, to the psycho-social dynamics of boarding-house life. The Almanacks also reveal examples of a single woman’s reality in early America, a life that included weeks and months of tending to sick, dying, and even insane relatives.

Each of these perspectives enlarges our understanding of how Mary Moody Emerson steadfastly pursued a vivid and expansive world of ideas, even as she grappled with the knotty contingencies of everyday life in antebellum America. In a recent scholarly forum on hypertexts, Peter Stallybrass suggests that electronic editions have “changed our relation to the ownership of knowledge.”19 We trust that engaging with Emerson’s Almanacks via digital media will allow students, scholars, and other interested readers to explore the plenitude of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American life and culture for decades to come.

16 Founded in 1994, the Dickinson Electronic Archives at <http://www.emilydickinson.org/> , is “devoted to the study of Emily Dickinson, her writing practices, writings directly influencing her work, and critical and creative writings generated by her work.” In addition to electronic texts of Dickinson’s writings, it provides scholarly information on a variety of topics related to Dickinson, such as her incorporation of graphic marginalia and cartoons in her manuscripts, as well as teaching aids for using these electronic materials.

