

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Repackaging Periodicals for the Holiday Season: The Peculiar Nature and Economics of Spurious Gift Book Production

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IN THE LATER PART of 1847, a work titled *The Literary Annual; A Compendium of Religious, Literary and Philosophical Knowledge* quietly appeared on the New York book market.¹ All outward indications suggest that this title was intended as a keepsake for the holiday season. Bound in decorative cloth with blindstamped gilt floral motifs and illustrated with engravings and hand-colored plates, it contains the works of several popular contemporary authors, including Seba Smith, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Edgar Allan Poe. But contrary to its pleasing aesthetics, this title was *not* a conventional gift book mass-produced for the holiday market but rather a collection of periodical issues cleverly disguised and passed on to unsuspecting consumers.

1. *The Literary Annual: A Compendium of Religious, Literary and Philosophical Knowledge* (New York: n.p., 1848). The publishing industry's method of dating gift books suggests that this title should have been available for sale by late 1847.

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The Literary Annual provides an excellent example of a long-ignored subgenre of literary gift book publishing—the practice of binding together surplus periodicals that were then sold as decorative collections. This obscure niche of nineteenth-century publishing is mentioned in passing in many general works dealing with the gift book phenomenon, but there is a dearth of scholarship presenting the defining elements of spurious gift books and the economic market realities surrounding their production.

Unquestionably, *The Literary Annual* is made up of twelve issues of the short-lived monthly serial, *The Literary Emporium*, first published in New York by J. K. Wellman, repackaged and then offered for sale two years after original publication.² Although gift books were customarily mass produced commodities, today *The Annual* is quite scarce, and only four copies are listed in major library catalogs. Additionally, although it contains Poe's masterpiece, "The Raven," *The Annual* is rarely acknowledged by Poe biographers and bibliographers. The obvious questions presented by this curious discovery are why a publisher would choose to reformat a magazine years after its original production and why so few copies of the re-designed work remain.

The answers lie both in the economics of nineteenth-century literary publishing and the nature of the gift book trade. Often called annuals, keepsakes, or tokens, gift books were a product of an era of sentimentality fashionable throughout the mid-1800s. Produced for the holiday season and intended to be given as tokens of affection, they were usually highly decorative, often illustrated, and contained writings by the popular authors of the time.³ Their growth in popularity was due not only to a strong market for holiday gift books but also to the readiness of popular American authors to use the genre as an outlet for their short fiction and poetry due to the absence of international copyright laws that stifled their ability to get published in single-author novel or book form.⁴ In other words, because contemporary laws permitted American publishers to re-

2. *The Literary Emporium; a Compendium of Religious, Literary, and Philosophical Knowledge* (New York: J. K. Wellman, 1845–47).

3. See Ralph Thompson, *American Literary Annuals & Gift Books, 1825–1865* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936), 1–6, 16.

4. Rollo G. Silver and Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America, a History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1951), 99–109.

issue books produced in other countries without having to pay for copyright, American authors were often forced to rely on periodicals or gift books as their primary vehicle for being seen in print.⁵

Not only did publishers have a willing pool of authors to choose from, the market for sentimental keepsakes was also large and diverse, resulting in the creation of several categories to meet every possible market niche. These included titles of a religious nature, collections targeted expressly to women, ones created for specific organizations, and reprints of best-sellers from previous years. Within this expansive field an opportunity existed for publishers to slip works onto the market that were not proper gift books designed to meet the public's desire for ornate tokens of affection but rather spurious gift books created simply to move surplus periodical stock on the holiday market.

It was clearly a questionable practice to present these books to the public as new products, but the realities of the trade meant that publishers existed on slim margins and sought profits wherever possible. The simple economics of risk of loss versus chance for profit dictated that during the infancy of any new periodical, particularly one that was illustrated with engravings and hand-colored plates, a publisher would produce only enough copies to meet subscription needs and very little more. Overestimating the anticipated market desire could be a costly mistake. To a small publisher (like J. K. Wellman) in a large market (like New York), already heavy with literary periodicals, unsold copies would quickly become an albatross, and selling off the unsold stock to a speculator or repackaging the surplus issues for the holiday market were viable options.

Despite their misleading outward appearances, an examination of the contents of any disguised gift book quickly exposes its spurious nature. Because *The Literary Annual* is typical of these items, it can be used to illustrate several of the common elements. The title page bears the Latin phrase, "Multum in Parvo," literally, "Much in Little," and indeed there is much to be found in this small volume. With the exception of the title page, the text block and plates are unmistakably made up of twelve issues of the *Literary Emporium*. But *The Literary Annual* is not simply a chro-

5. Poe gives a contemporary perspective on this in the introduction of "Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House" (1845), reprinted in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969; repr., Belknap Press, 1978), 3:1206.

nological compilation of back issues sewn together; instead it comprises a shuffling of two volumes of the periodical. Although this reordering may have been an intention to mislead the consumer, it is more likely that the contents of this and other spurious books were defined simply by the unsold issues that were available and could be arranged in such a manner so that the pagination ran more or less continuously. To this end, *The Annual* begins with the January through June 1846 issues (originally published as volume 3 of *The Emporium*) and finishes with the July through December 1845 issues (volume 2 of *The Emporium*).⁶

Although an attempt was made to remove all indications of its original serial nature by adding a new title page and decorative binding, traces of its periodical origins clearly remain. Individual issues can easily be identified and separated by the engravings and floral plates retained from when they were inserted into the beginning and end of each monthly issue. Additionally, in the middle of the gift book a small message from Wellman appears, "To Our Readers," stating the annual cost of *The Emporium*, and soliciting new subscribers.⁷ Other revealing elements are the lack of a table of contents and the serialization of stories. In one glaring instance, which must have frustrated any recipient of this gift, is the presence of "The Religion and Superstition of The North American Indians" by Seba Smith. Parts 1 through 4 appear scattered throughout the first half of the book (in actuality, volume 3 of *The Emporium*), but because the second half of the gift book was actually a portion of volume 2 in its serial incarnation, the reader is deprived of the end of the essay.⁸

This deception, so easily revealed by a casual perusal of the volume, raises the question of why the initial consumers did not similarly cotton to the ruse. The most probable answer is the fact that by the late 1840s, gift books (both spurious and non) were seen as commodities, not only by the producer but by the purchaser and recipient as well—having transformed over the span of their popularity from monographs whose content was as important as their outward appearance into a sort of commodity of affection; all parties to the transaction by now viewed the utility of these books simply, as their genre suggests, as gifts or tokens—not to be

6. Four copies were physically examined: Library of Congress, University of Iowa, and two held in a private collection.

7. *The Literary Annual*, 192.

8. Originally appearing as parts 5 and 6 in volume 4.

actually read but merely purchased, presented, and received. Renowned engraver John Sartain described the state of literary annuals at the time: "The literary character is at least stationary, if not retrograding . . . *Now* an annual is bought to look at. No one ever thinks of reading them."⁹

Regardless whether they were ever actually read or even intended to be read, producers of spurious gift books clearly did not want customers to connect them to the deception, therefore the omitting of publisher marks was a common practice, and *The Annual* is not an exception.¹⁰ Although it comprised old periodical issues, it should not be assumed that the creators of spurious gift books were the same as the publishers of the serial. Applied to the title currently under analysis, this means that simply because J. K. Wellman published *The Emporium*, it is not a certainty that he also created and sold *The Literary Annual*. Between 1847 and 1848 Wellman moved his publishing operations west from New York to Detroit in order to produce a new literary magazine that not only had fewer competitors but was also niche-marketed as a title that "did not attempt to suit the morbid and vicious tastes of those who can read nothing but that which excites the passions."¹¹ In all likelihood *The Literary Annual* was the product of a final attempt to liquidate surplus stock before Wellman's move west. Perhaps it was indeed Wellman who published this book, but it is equally possible that a speculator simply purchased the remaindered issues from Wellman at one of the ordinary publishers' trade shows with the intention of making a small profit in the wake of the growing popularity of not only Poe, but other emerging authors.¹²

Because production runs of these titles were based not on a perceived market need but rather limited to the amount of surplus stock available, it is not surprising that spurious gift books are often fugitive and rarely mentioned in contemporary and later sources. Again, *The Literary Annual* helps to illustrate this point. Supporting the notion that it was sur-

9. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 421, citing *Sartain's Magazine* 1, no. 154 (February 1849).

10. Thompson, *American Literary Annuals*, 14-15.

11. *Wellman's Literary Miscellany*, vol. 1 (Detroit, MI: J. K. Wellman, 1849-51), title page. The Midwest market must not have been passionate about the new title as it ceased publication within three years.

12. Silver and Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America*, 258-59, discuss the practice of trade shows.

reptitiously snuck onto the market was the curious lack of fanfare and advertising normally associated with any new gift book. New York is clearly stated as the place of production, but the title appears neither in any of the standard literary weeklies nor in the new book announcements of *The Literary World*, that city's leading publishing trade publication.¹³

Deepening the mystery surrounding this volume is the fact that on the final three pages appears Poe's masterpiece, "The Raven." The publication of any work of Poe's printed during his lifetime is bibliographically significant, but when that work is "The Raven," its importance is elevated to a higher level. It is strange then, for an author whose canon is recorded in such detail, that *The Literary Annual* is shrouded in obscurity and rarely recorded. Not only is this title overlooked by both Faxon and Thompson, the authoritative gift book bibliographers, it is also ignored in the many works of Poe's biographers, including Mabbott, Quinn, Campbell and Woodberry.¹⁴ Heartman and Canny do make note of the title in their bibliography, describing it in detail apparently from a copy in hand, but although two other sources list the title as containing a "reprint" of the poem, they seem hesitant to confirm *The Annual's* existence, referring instead back to Heartman and Canny for their authority.¹⁵

It should be noted here that this common bibliographical designation of spurious gift books as "reprints" is a gross misnomer. It is true that a culture of reprinting existed during this period, and many gift books were produced from stereotyped plates that had been either sold or leased to a third party or brought out of storage by publishers to cash in on the new fame of the authors, but *The Literary Annual* is clearly not one of these.

13. "Publishers Circular," *The Literary World* (New York: Osgood, 1847-1853), cols. 1847-48. A thorough examination was made of the weekly "List of Books Published in the United States" column from January 1847 through December 1948.

14. Frederick Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift-Books; a Bibliography with a Descriptive Introduction* (Boston, MA: Boston Book Co., 1912); Mabbott records all known early publications of the poem, omitting *The Literary Annual* (*Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1:359-64).

15. Charles F. Heartman and James R. Canny, *A Bibliography of First Printings of the Writings of Edgar Allan Poe: Together with a Record of First and Contemporary Later Printings of His Contributions to Annuals, Anthologies, Periodicals and Newspapers Issued during His Lifetime, Also Some Spurious Poeana and Fakes*, rev. ed. (Hattiesburg, MS: The Book Farm, 1943), 116; Dwight Thomas and David Kelly Jackson, *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1987), 711.

For a publisher to issue such a reprint was a costly endeavor: paper, ink, and the hand-coloring of plates all represented an outlay of expenses for an uncertain number of sales. And although the new technology of stereotyping allowed for the production of smaller runs of copies to meet unpredictable consumer needs, the practice of reprinting gift books using stereotyped plates was reserved for those titles where large sales were expected and did not require the added costs of producing and hand-coloring plates.¹⁶ It is more accurate then to refer to this obscure work and its copy of “The Raven” not as a reprint but rather as purposeful reissue.¹⁷

The aforementioned lack of bibliographic references to *The Annual* is not surprising once one understands that, because their economic origins were to simply move surplus stock, oftentimes very few copies of spurious gift books were produced. In fact, a title’s present-day scarcity is yet another telling feature of its spurious nature. Typically, gift books were produced for national or regional distribution, and their print runs numbered into the thousands—in their heyday into the tens of thousands, but *The Literary Annual* is an aberration and clearly an annual in name only.¹⁸ Although the Library of Congress holds a copy in their rare book collection, the work is not to be found in *The National Union Catalog* or among the listings of the standard out-of-print book services. Additionally, *WorldCat* records only three institutions as holding a copy.¹⁹ This scarcity coupled with the original intent behind the production of *The Literary Emporium* (to meet subscribers’ needs) dictates that the number of remaindered copies available for reformatting could not have been very many, making surviving copies of the gift book truly rare objects.

16. Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 97–98, discussing the economics of stereotype reprints.

17. See Fredson Bowers, *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949; Winchester: St. Paul’s Bibliographies, 1986, 1994), 393–426, 407, for a discussion of issue in the machine-press era.

18. McGill, *American Literature*, 285n45.

19. The University of Illinois, Chicago, the University of Iowa, and the New-York Historical Society.