CHAPTER 1

Bibliographic Nationalism
Marketing America in Horace Mann’s School Library

In the preface to The Juvenile Budget Opened (1840), the first of three volumes on the selected writings of respected English Romantics Anna Laetitia Barbauld and her brother, John Aikin, Sarah Hale explains that the texts were written “for English children. You must, therefore, expect to find the scenes mostly laid in England, and English character and manners described.” Paradoxically, these three editions—The Juvenile Budget Opened, Things by Their Right Names (1840), and The Juvenile Budget Reopened (1840)—are part of The School Library, an ambitious, Board of Education-sanctioned series of books meant by Horace Mann, architect of Massachusetts’ public school system, for use throughout all of the state’s district school libraries. Commenced in 1839, The School Library was a self-consciously literary nationalist enterprise aimed at producing the informed, self-disciplined, and uniform citizenry thought necessary for the success of a free nation. In scope, the series would, according to its “Introductory Essay,” embrace “every department of Science and Literature,” and be rich in “the history of our own Country; in Biography, particularly of distinguished Americans; in Voyages and Travels; in those branches of Natural Philosophy and Natural History, which are most useful,” as well as in the much-overlooked “agricultural and mechanical pursuits.” Designed as “reading, and not school, class, or text books,” and, thus, intended for the use of “the whole community” rather than just one class of children, it featured volumes prepared by such nineteenth-century
American luminaries as Washington Irving, Sarah J. Hale, Catharine Sedgwick, and other “individuals, distinguished for their learning, superior judgment, and moral excellence.” (See table 1.1.) That Hale’s editions, including what Sarah Robbins calls one of the more “appropriative” adaptations of Barbauld’s work, *Things by Their Right Names*, which contains her contributions to *Evenings at Home* (1792–96), as well as selections from *Lessons for Children* (1778–88) and *Hymns in Prose* (1781), should find its way into *The School Library* suggests the extent to which such English writings were considered some of the period’s indispensable “American” texts. Indeed, declaring that, in her volumes, readers will find “a table to show you the value of English money, compared with that of our own country” (*Juvenile Budget*, 8), Hale suggests that she edits the work in the hopes of translating English worth into American economic and moral value. Hale, the editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, one of the most popular woman’s magazines in the United States, built her career on the arrangement of other writers’ work. Her selection of texts for the *School Library* volumes are meant, as she says, to demonstrate “how we Americans differ, in our thoughts and feelings, from the English people” (7), even as she praises their precepts as “particularly suited to our age and country” (4) in both Christian morality and republican sentiment. But these editions are of “value,” ultimately, not merely as manifestations of an American literary market that reprinted English authors and encouraged transatlantic piracy, but also as a case study in the intricacies of efforts to teach “American” values through foreign literature.

Not all the library’s contents, of course, were foreign in origin; besides new editions of “standard” foreign texts, it included reissued works by respected native authors, as well as original productions by newly home-grown talent. In this regard, incipient government efforts at educational reform provided important opportunities in the development of professional authorship in America, carving out vast new markets for the publishing industry while providing expanded avenues for American authors to disseminate their work. Such efforts demonstrate the extent to which commodity culture was built into educational reform from the start, since the birth of the literary series format itself in the eighteenth century had as much to do with economics as with ideology. In other words, it had as much to do with publisher costs, copyright, and new print technologies as with grandiose efforts to promote a canon of national “classics” that might rival the venerated works of antiquity, or, for Americans, of Europe more generally. Even as the Board of Education disavowed pecuniary motivation, claiming for *The School Library* a “sacred adherence” to the principle of democratic education, economic considerations
Table 1.1
Volume Titles in *The School Library, Adult Series, and Juvenile Series.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2–3. Bartlett Elisha, M.D. <em>Paley’s Natural Theology</em> (1839)</td>
<td>2. Hale, Sarah J. <em>PlaLOCITY of Taste, and Other Stories, Selected from the Writings of Jane Taylor</em> (1839)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–12. Bigelow, Jacob, M.D. <em>The Useful Arts</em> (1840)</td>
<td>5. Lee, Mary E. <em>Social Evenings; Or, Historic Tales for Youth</em> (1840)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Phelps, Mrs. Lincoln. <em>The Fireside Friend; Or, Female Student; being Advice to Young Ladies on the Important Subject of Education</em> (1840)</td>
<td>10. <em>The Child’s Friend; Being Selections from the Writings of Arnaud Berquin</em> (1840)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were thus inseparable from the shape the series took. The Board insisted that its publisher manufacture “neat” editions as “plainly” and yet “substantially” as possible, producing books affordable enough to achieve the library’s democratic purpose (the dissemination of print to what Mann called those “broad wastes” existing beyond Boston), and yet commensurate with—that is, materially adequate to communicating—the moral worth of the lessons they contained.  

What makes *The School Library* worth investigating, therefore, is the way in which, as both a self-consciously nationalist enterprise and a literary commodity competing within a market that was transatlantic in scope, it articulates what its architects understand as an “American” social sense that cannot be divorced from the material and economic conditions from which it springs. Building upon what Meredith McGill describes as “the many insights that can be gleaned from an analysis of the formats in which antebellum literature appeared,” this chapter examines *The School Library* inside and out, attending to its advertisements, contents, and production values to consider how its editions articulate “Americanness” as a specific kind of moral spectacle within the antebellum marketplace. In this regard, the materiality of the editions—what it meant for consumers to have such “respectable,” as the library’s architects termed them, objects in their hands—mattered to both the economic and social aims of the enterprise because *The School Library* quite literally sought to manufacture national character through exceptionally produced, widely disseminated editions. Through this spectacle, the volumes ultimately enact what I term “bibliographic nationalism,” embodying a desire to cultivate national markets for literary texts, combined with the moral enterprise of nationalism amid anxieties of foreign influence.

**Schools, Authors, and Economics**

*The School Library* had its origins in an 1837 Massachusetts state law authorizing each school district to raise $30 by tax for the purchase of library books. The newly established Board of Education deemed it advisable to leave the preparation of volumes to “the enterprise and judgment of publishers, who would, no doubt, find it for their interest” to satisfy public demand (*First Annual Report*, 14). By placing the onus on the industry, the Board relied upon competition to keep prices down and options plentiful, thereby allowing districts to choose from a variety of books suited to their needs. Few districts, however, availed themselves of the opportunity; within a year, there
were still only 50 school libraries in the whole state, 15 of which were located in Boston. The Board speculated that the problem might have been the “difficulty of making the selection” amidst the superabundance of texts and with limited funds (Second Annual Report, 19), while Mann surmised that districts struggled to select books because of partisan “jealousy” among residents (“On District School Libraries,” 270). In March 1838, therefore, he proposed that the Board sanction its own series, adapted to the needs of the state’s common schools and “free from objection on account of partisan opinion in politics, or sectarian views in religion,” while still leaving it to districts to select their own books (270).

After consulting with publishers, the Board contracted Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, of Boston, to produce two series of 50 volumes each: a “Juvenile series” intended for children “ten or twelve years of age and under,” and a series for more “advanced scholars and their parents” (“Introductory Essay,” ix). Marsh et al. estimated they could offer the library to schools in accordance with the Board’s demand for “neat editions of books” for approximately $57.50, or a discount of 15 to 20 percent on what they charged for publications of a similar quality. In exchange, they would receive the “privilege of preparing the whole series” and the benefit of “an announcement to the public, that the work had the unanimous sanction or approbation” of the Board (Mann, “District School Libraries,” 70–71). The firm could expect a significant competitive advantage from such an endorsement, so much so that one editor complained that, by promoting a single publisher’s sales, the Board’s sanction amounted to unlawful “censorship of the press” and a “sin” against the “dignity and freedom of letters.”

While the Board had expected to vet all manuscripts submitted for the series, it quickly became clear this was not feasible, as Mann intimated when he told historian George Bancroft that he had been so inundated with requests to examine manuscripts “in esse or in posse” that it “would have occupied the time of each member of the Board more than half of the year” to respond to them all. As Marsh et al. had hoped to make such arrangements with the Board in relation to submissions as would “enable us to go on with publishing without interruption” in business, the firm thus proposed to take the task upon itself, occasionally presenting them with lists of texts they intended to publish, books which, “when completed,” would then “be subject to the examination of the Board to be modified or rejected” for their sanction. In other words, they proposed they be allowed to solicit and publish what made the most financial sense to them, while simultaneously consulting with the Board “in reference to proper subjects for the series & proper men to prepare the
volumes.” Those publications that received the Board’s approbation would then be released as a *School Library* edition, with any required emendations.

This model explains the publishers’ advertisements for *The School Library*, which often announced editions as forthcoming, “provided they are approved by the Board of Education,” and which listed some texts despite Mann’s own reservations about them. For example, the publishers’ advertisements tout “NEW-ENGLAND HISTORICAL SKETCHES, by N. Hawthorne, *Author of ‘Twice Told Tales,’ &c.*” as under preparation for the juvenile series despite Mann’s well-documented ambivalence toward Hawthorne’s writing. The publishers also presented to the Board a list of proposed texts that included a historical volume, “History of the Pilgrims, by a Lady” (the mother of Mann’s close friends, the Peabody sisters), which he had declined to advocate personally for fear of appearing partial. The irony, of course, is that, despite its need to appear fastidiously objective in recommendation of texts, when it could not sign desired authors or when it was easier to rely on works from those whose characters were already known, the enterprise relied upon coterie publication practices that characterized much of antebellum print culture.

But while these arrangements alleviated the weight put upon the Board, Mann could not help feel that, at times, sound business sense might conflict with high-minded educational principle. On one occasion, he was pleased to hear that his friend and fellow reformer, Samuel Gridley Howe, had declined to produce a geography simply because Capen desired it for *The School Library*. Mann confessed that Capen “knows that I look with great anxiety to his success . . . but he must not barter principle for money, nor offer it in the market, nor talk about offering it.” Therefore, he applauded Howe’s decision to “keep [his] eye on the subject . . . & not compromise the matter by enriching booksellers & impoverishing the cause.” It was that base motive, writing for “filthy lucre,” as he tells him, that threatened to turn what he called elsewhere the “grandest moral enterprise” (“On District School Libraries,” 275) into nothing more than yet another “sordid enterprise” of personal gain masquerading as universal education. Indeed, it was precisely because even the best of booksellers like Capen could, despite their pure intentions, so readily give into mercenary considerations that made the Board’s oversight so necessary.

On the whole, however, Mann was pleased with the terms of their arrangement; in superintending *The School Library*, he argued, the Board was rendering the state a service “not only of immeasurable moral and intellectual value,” but, with the discount afforded by the agreement, one “capable of being estimated in dollars and cents.” He invited detractors to compare the
character of his publishers’ volumes, both those already issued by them and those on their list of prospective titles, “with a library of the Harpers to learn their cheapness, & it will be seen what the state owes to this Board for its services.” Harper & Brothers was a major competitor for school libraries in Massachusetts, but, since their enterprise was, as Mann termed it, “got up under their own impulse of money-making,” he believed it to be inferior in both quality of production and rigor of selective principle to his own. It appeared, for example, only in octodecimo (18mo) “pocket” editions, which, as Wesley Harper once described it, were “quite as respectable” but not so “handsome” as the admittedly more expensive duodecimo (12mo) format, while The School Library was issued in both formats, depending on the series.

Thus, the partnership aimed for the cheapest volumes possible, “bearing in mind,” as the publishers put it, “their high intellectual character, and the style of their mechanical execution.” Priced at 40 cents and 75 cents each, the volumes were issued in sets of five or ten books at a time to put the library “with in the reach of those Districts, which, from the limited amount of their annual funds, would not otherwise be enabled to procure it,” and also to ensure its quality of production. In a dig at Harper & Brothers, which produced its books with startling rapidity, Marsh et al. declared: “It is not the intention of the Publishers to drive these works through the Press with an undue speed, in the hopes of securing the market, by the multiplicity of the publications cast upon the community; they rely for patronage, upon the intrinsic merit of the works.” But even at these “reasonable” rates (hardcover books generally ranged from 75 cents to $1.25), the volumes were expensive; at the time, a skilled white male laborer’s weekly salary was approximately $6. As the introductory essay’s overly sanguine proclamation about modern books—whose “unprecedented cheapness” meant that a “week’s labor of a working man, will earn for him, in almost any part of the United States, the price of eight or ten handsome duodecimo volumes”—ironically suggests, books were, in fact, still quite costly (“Introductory Essay,” vii).

Given this continued costliness, Mann felt that district school libraries were needed to counteract what he calls, in his Third Annual Report, the “inequality with which the means of knowledge are spread,” the “few deep, capacious reservoirs, surrounded by broad wastes” characterizing book distribution in Massachusetts (57). As Ronald Zboray has shown, despite publishers’ triumphalism about the democratizing power of modern printing, mechanical advances did not significantly improve the general populace’s access to books, or necessitate their equal distribution throughout the countryside. In most regions, book acquisition continued to be difficult, and what
libraries the state had did little to alleviate this problem. Mann estimated that “but little more than one hundred thousand persons, or one seventh part of the population of the State,” had “any right of access” to its few public libraries.\textsuperscript{23} Even in metropolitan Boston, where social libraries constituted almost half of all such holdings in the state, only one-tenth of the city’s population had any access to them (\textit{Third Annual Report}, 56). But with schoolhouses as “central points” in “minute subdivisions of territory” no larger than two square miles in size under the district plan, school libraries could offer books at “convenient distances, distributed with great uniformity all over the Commonwealth” (94–95).

Since Massachusetts had over 3,000 such districts, the legislature’s authorization of $30 for each district in the first year and $10 thereafter meant the possibility of $90,000 raised in a single year, with $30,000 each subsequent year for the purchase of library books. Additionally, in 1842 the legislature offered $15 to each district that would match the amount themselves—an appropriation of another $90,000 for school libraries. This made the state a profitable market for any publisher who could supply its demand. Harper & Brothers, for one, was interested in establishing its \textit{School District Library} (published starting in 1838) there, “taking hold of the enterprise with great spirit,” as one of its agents said, in the hopes of seeing its library “scattered, all over the land.” The firm had previously negotiated for the Board’s sanction, promising to take from their share of the profits “a discount to the trade . . . to make it the interest of all the Booksellers in the Union, to circulate the Library”; although the Board settled on a local firm, still, Harper & Brothers hoped it would “be willing to give some recommendation of our selection” even if “they choose to go on alone.”\textsuperscript{24}

It was precisely this sort of profitability that could make for headaches when dealing with booksellers. Much has been made of the Mann-Packard controversy already, but, given the stakes involved in the markets fostered by institutions like the Board of Education, such sensational attacks were not at all uncommon.\textsuperscript{25} Mann often complained about harassment by “book-makers & sellers, copy-right owners & agents” who self-interestedly railed against the Board whenever it threatened their financial prospects. Indeed, he waggishly proclaimed to have “known a book-maker seek anxiously to learn the opinions of the Board of Education respecting his book, in order to qualify himself to decide upon the expediency of its having been established.”\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, Michigan’s first superintendent of public education, John D. Pierce, wrote to Mann in late 1839, describing his own experiences with the “book-making interest” in the state. After Michigan adopted the district
school library model, Pierce was attacked by an “astonishingly sensitive” book-selling faction “sure to be down upon the man who is so unfortunate as not to appease every worthless thing, that it may offer to the public in the form of a school book.” In one instance, he was assaulted in an anonymous handbill, which conferred upon him a “shower of abusive epithets,” including charges of “ignorance,” “partiality,” and “intentional misrepresentation.” It was written, he surmised, either by an author whose work he had critiqued or by someone “deeply interested in the sale of the book.” Michigan, Pierce notes, had organized “about 2000 districts” in the last three years, surely a consideration in the vehemence of the attacks.\(^{27}\)

Mann’s complaints about “book-makers” also extended to his dealings with authors, who seemed always to place financial concerns on par with his sacred cause. But while publishers stood to make huge profits by such enterprises, authors often did not; industry practices conspired to keep them relatively poorly paid. For his part, Mann demanded the best and most celebrated authors for this series, and yet, as Richard Henry Dana Jr. records contemptuously in his journal, he preferred that their compensation be “small,” that they content themselves with little more than what “approbation” the Board might offer as recompense. Of course, authorial responses to pay varied by the individual, and were often relative to the labor put into a text. Hawthorne, for instance, confessed to Longfellow that he meant to “turn [his] attention to writing for children” and “the series of works projected by the Board of Education” because, it appeared to him, “there is a very fair chance of profit.” Similarly, Sarah P. E. Hale felt “quite repaid” by the earnings for her children’s books, and she happily received $142.50 for the two modest-length volumes on the lives of colonial explorers in America she wrote for The School Library, claiming the arrangement had “turned out better than [she] expected.” One particularly irate author, however, complained to Mann that the $500 premium offered for the outright copyright to his educational treatise “would not pay a common laborer’s wages for the time expended in preparing myself for it.”\(^{28}\)

Even Catharine Maria Sedgwick, whom Mann greatly admired, was not above financial considerations.\(^{29}\) When Marsh et al. wrote to inquire whether she would contribute a volume to the series, promising to “pay a premium” to publish it even in the event that it did not receive the Board’s sanction, her brother Charles wrote to Mann. Professing that his sister had a schoolbook “designed for girls,” Means and Ends; Or, Self-Training (1839), he also admitted that she desired the Board’s sanction because it would “increase the circulation, & she trusts [the book’s] usefulness.” But even as he assured Mann
of his sister’s “sympathy” with and “clear . . . sense of the principle” of his cause, Charles lamented, “I need not tell you what is within the experience of every author that it is difficult to avoid in any contract with a Bookseller a very unequal division of profits & labor.” In the letter’s postscript, Sedgwick herself agreed with this assessment, telling Mann she did “not wish to publish it in a way to obstruct its introduction with other district libraries.”

While she was eager for inclusion, in other words, she desired no arrangement that would preclude her from releasing other editions of the book, and thus from maximizing not only its “circulation” and “usefulness,” but also her own profits.

One of the region’s most celebrated poets, Longfellow had declined to contribute to the library series because it was not, in his estimation, profitable enough. Having conversed with Webb, he informed a friend that a volume for the adult series would have an initial run “of 1500 copies; giving . . . ten percent on the retail price of all published, in semi-annual payments, beginning six months after publication,” or, as he put it, “$112.00 & no more.” Despite this dismissal (he also calls the pay “very small,” and asserts that he had “declined to have anything to do with” the series “on such terms”), ten percent was as good a rate as most writers could expect, and the arrangement had the benefit, as he admits, of carrying “no risk” to the author—more than can be said of many contracts signed at the time. But since a writer of his reputation (and business acumen) might command more advantageous terms, the publishers would have to do better to secure his talent.

Longfellow’s rejection of what he considered an amateur’s salary therefore suggests an incontrovertible economic reality shaping the library; rather than signing only the “most popular and talented authors in this country,” Mann might have to settle for the best he could afford (“District School Libraries,” 71).

But even as Longfellow denigrated its financial returns, he pointed to a major benefit of writing for the library: the cultural capital to be gained. He informs his friend that, in contributing to the series, an author might have his or her “name carried into every village in New England, & it will grow up with the rising generation.” Although this did not entice Longfellow, possibly because he was on his way to becoming a household name, the admiration of the rising generation was a powerful incentive for equally notable writers such as Washington Irving. When approached, Irving offered an abridgment of his \textit{Life and Voyages of Columbus}, remarking upon the opportunities he was willing to pass up in introducing it into the library: “In publishing in your series I lose my chance of making a sale of the work.
Bibliographic Nationalism

in England, and for this very work, which was written for Murray’s Family Library.” Similarly, George Bancroft wrote to Mann, confessing “very much” his “desire” to bring his *History of the United States* “within the reach of the Common Schools of Massachusetts by gaining for it a place in the Common School Libraries.” So much, in fact, did he relish the prospect that he was “willing to forgo in a great measure” compensation from the work’s copyright if that might be a means to his inclusion. Indeed, the potential for the social dissemination of a library volume was great; in 1838, Mann estimated the state had approximately 165,000 schoolchildren (*First Annual Report*, 37). If one considers the families who might also use these libraries, then there was the potential for hundreds of thousands of patrons. *The School Library* would also reach a captive audience, since, for many residents, it would be their *only* access to books; Mann reported that there were at least 100 towns, or a third of the towns in the state, with no other public libraries at all (*Third Annual Report*, 57).

Furthermore, a well-produced school library might find its way into multiple markets, like Harper & Brothers’ own New York, or Michigan, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Iowa, and Indiana, all of which began organizing district school libraries in the late 1830s and 1840s. This prospect did not escape the backers of *The School Library*. Remarking upon the “general merit of each volume” in its library, the “Introductory Essay” claims that it “cannot but anticipate . . . a demand coextensive with the void to be filled,” that is, “the whole number of school districts in this, and a fair portion of the districts in the neighboring States” (x). The “neighboring state” of New York alone had close to eleven thousand school districts, all of which were to be supplied with libraries under recently passed legislation. The “Introductory Essay” thus crowed that New York had allotted a generous apportionment of “*One hundred and ten thousand dollars*, each year” for the purpose (viii; emphasis in original), and, as if transfixed by the possibilities of the enterprise on which the Board had embarked, it reiterates the “munificent appropriation” of “two thirds of a million dollars, within six years” to be paid out for “probably nearly a million and a half volumes” (x). A notice for *The School Library* in *The Christian Examiner* also identifies Ohio, which, along with New York, comprised “about one-fourth of the population of the Union,” as yet another lucrative market, with over eight thousand Districts and “the prospect of a similar appropriation for the same object” as New York. Hence, books for Massachusetts schoolchildren represented a potentially national market.
“Respectable” Publishing

As a joint enterprise undertaken by both the Massachusetts Board of Education and the private publishing firm of Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb that attempted to reach consumers beyond the Bay State, *The School Library* walked a fine line between recognition of print as spectacle and commitment to values deemed quintessentially “American,” such as economy and self-restraint. In other words, its architects hoped to maintain in some small measure the material pleasures of antebellum reading while transferring the object of these pleasures from cheap and, as many saw it, morally questionable productions to the creations of more “respectable” houses, to use the Board’s description of their own publisher (*Second Annual Report*, 20). In so doing, the library’s “few good books,” as Mann called them (“On District School Libraries,” 275), sought to produce a spectacle of morality—a bibliographic respectability—not only as a means to sell copies but also as a way to promote a cohesive and homogenous national identity within the carnival of transatlantic print culture.38

Patricia Crain has demonstrated that, from their inception, early American educational texts such as primers and alphabet books were ensconced in the sights and sounds of the marketplace, encouraging literacy through pleasurable looking by scavenging from tavern signs, folk rhymes, street slang, and other popular forms of the day, and by turning the alphabet into an “occasion for display.” As hybrid forms born of a “new middle class gentility” and the “rough-and-tumble realm of commerce,” early American primers and spellers enacted what Crain calls “festive discipline,” a tension or melding between an informational, moralizing ethic and the promise of “sensual and emotional pleasures.” “Festive discipline” thus registers both the genre’s desire to discipline readers, to induct them into strict bourgeois Christian and republican literacies, and its playful residue of the popular and the low not obscured by “genteel revision” or appropriation.39

While no one would ever confuse its decorous, genteel character with the “laughing, raucous, and bawdy mischievousness” of early primers, *The School Library* nonetheless articulates its own kind of “festive discipline,” harnessing the “pleasurable looking” of the marketplace to produce ideal consumers, both of the book as object and of the printed word as the foundation for the national identity Mann championed.40 After all, the design of *The School Library*, as its “Introductory Essay” explains, is to “furnish youth with suitable works for perusal during their leisure hours; works that will interest, as well as instruct them; and of such a character that they will turn to them with plea-
sure, when it is desirable to unbend from the studies of the schoolroom” (xlvi). Devised to fill children’s “leisure hours,” the library suggests the totalizing scope of common-school reform, testifies to reformers’ Romantic emphasis on the joys of childhood, and reveals their discovery of a superior method for the “introjection” of bourgeois discipline. Consequently, the library’s method is to “clothe the subjects discussed, in a popular garb, that they may prove so attractive, as to lure the child onwards, fix his attention, and induce him, subsequently, to seek information from other and more recondite works, which, if put into his hands at the onset, would alarm him, and induce a disgust for that which would appear dry and unintelligible, and, of course, uninteresting” (xlvi–xlvii). This description of “luring” children to books that, at first glance, might normally “alarm” them reads like a caricature of what critics saw as popular literature’s pernicious influences. But the final clause makes it clear that in marrying “popular” methods to the principles of educational reform, The School Library seeks to make normally “dry” pedagogical texts as pleasurable as other forms of reading, and, in this way, to exert control over its readers, “fixing” or “inducing” in them more appropriate kinds of tastes and behaviors.

In keeping with a “festive discipline” that inculcated self-culture in popular apparel, the library’s advertisements promote the materiality of the series’ volumes, the textual “garb” meant to attract readers through the spectacle of its production. For instance, they emphasize the series’ illustrations, as such images were integral to the success of even the most ordinary antebellum print enterprise, as well as to the “text-image festivals” of early educational books. Therefore, when the North American Review lauds the “tasteful” portraits, maps, and engravings it calls “numerous” and “ornamental,” its reviewer alludes to a visual abundance that the texts’ own publishers were quick to trumpet. One advertisement puffs the library’s edition of William Paley’s Natural Theology (1839), the popular treatise evidencing God’s design in nature, as “superior to any ever before offered to the public” because it contains, among other improvements, a “Portrait of the Author” and “ninety-five beautiful wood-engravings” (the advertisement puts the number in italics, as if to emphasize its immensity). Yet another advertisement touts the “numerous copperplate engravings” in the library’s edition of Jacob Bigelow’s The Useful Arts (1840), a history of the mechanical and technical arts, and pegs the number of its woodcuts at a lavish one hundred and eighty. In its review of the library, The Christian Examiner best describes the intended effect of all these images when it calls the volumes “verily a treat to the eye.”

But even as they suggest the library’s abundant visual pleasures, these reviews and advertisements counterbalance claims of material delight with
appeals to utility serving to marry the ornamental to the informational. “Whenever the subjects render it necessary,” one testifies, the volumes “will be amply illustrated by well-executed wood cuts, and copperplate and steel engravings.” In claiming its illustrations are “ample” but always “well-executed,” the advertisement asserts that the publishers do not sacrifice quality for the sake of quantity, even when they employ woodcuts, the least expensive of available illustration technologies. Furthermore, it proclaims the publishers’ restraint by assuring buyers that these embellishments are included only when “necessary,” as dictated by the subjects covered rather than by the whim of the publishers. Even the volumes’ more ornamental embellishments had their purpose. The publishers advertised Jared Sparks’s three-volume abridgment of his Lives of Eminent Individuals, hagiographies of colonial and revolutionary New England’s founding fathers, as containing not only portraits of the biographies’ historical figures but also “autographs of most of the individuals” discussed in them. In this way, the series incorporates as a selling point yet another popular nineteenth-century fad, autograph collecting, as it makes use of handwritten artifacts that were thought to provide important insights into individual character. In other words, the facsimile signatures served to “authorize” the editions, signifying a conflation of self and text that purportedly offered readers authentic access to the moral “character” of these historical persons through their written “character,” while simultaneously allowing the publishers competitive advantage over the unauthorized reprints often circulating in the market.

In this way, the publishers promote yet another dimension of the library’s spectacle, what may be termed the expenditures of moral restraint inherent in its production. One circular, for example, emphasizes the monetary costs involved in creating a product of such high caliber, claiming “no expense will be spared to render the series equal, if not superior, to any published in the world.” Yet, at the same time, a review in the Christian Examiner calls the price of The School Library “exceedingly moderate,” when one considers the “labor and learning bestowed upon the improvement of these editions, the beauty and durability of the mechanical execution,” and the publishers’ own advertisements pronounce it “cheaper than any other series of works that can be procured at home or abroad, bearing in mind their high intellectual character, and the style of their mechanical execution.” In making a spectacle of the series, publicizing its price and style, these advertisements suggest an excessiveness to its publishers’ displays of economic restraint, noting their refusal to pass costs onto consumers in the form of higher prices even as their expenditures ensure the library’s “beauty and durability.” Given the
Figure 1.1
publishers’ hyperbolic claims about their expenditures (“no expense will be spared”) and the library’s affordability (“cheaper” than any other “at home or abroad”), what these declarations advertise is, ultimately, the moral superiority embodied in the series’ manufacture.

Indeed, in light of all these features, the *North American Review* claims the volumes “do credit to the taste of the publishers. . . . The books are handsome enough for a drawing-room library, and yet are done up in a style well adapted to the rough and tumble of promiscuous circulation.” In judging the series’ presentation fit for one’s “drawing-room library,” where it might strike the eyes of guests and visitors, the reviewer makes it clear that the volumes display more than merely the publishers’ “taste,” also pointing to the discriminating sensibilities of the consumers who purchase these books. The volumes are, therefore, meant as testaments to potential buyers’ moral worth as much as to the publishers’ own, “done up in a style” fit to resist, literally and metaphorically, the degradations of a mass circulation that is, by definition, “promiscuous,” or excessive and unrestrained. In other words, the publishers offer respectability in the shape of a book, in much the same fashion that Ticknor and Fields would sell taste and culture in bound form through their distinctive “house styles” a decade later. (See figure 1.2.)

The publishers’ and reviewers’ insistence that the series constituted the best value available to readers at “home or abroad” further suggests that its material respectability was meant to act as a form of advantage not only within the confines of the local marketplace, but also within a transatlantic context; its architects attempted to manufacture a respectable national identity that might hold its own against foreign competitors on the world stage. *The School Library’s* architects thus hoped to introduce a thoroughly “Americanized” (their term) literature by hiring the “most popular and talented writers in this country, either to re-edit existing works, or to prepare new ones” (Mann, “District School Libraries,” 71), while its publishers would supply correspondingly distinctive font, style, and bindings. Such alterations, the advertisements claim, signaled that not only were the editions “newly arranged, and adapted for the School Library” but also, and more importantly, they contained “modifications to adapt it to American readers” (my italics). Praising the library’s efforts to “Americanize” the foreign reprints included in the series, for instance, one reviewer pronounces its edition of *Natural Theology* not a “mere republication” but rather “essentially a new work,” a “decided improvement” on the “recent English edition” used as its “foundation,” just as the United States itself was thought a refinement of its English antecedent.
Figure 1.2

“Plainly” and “substantially” bound volumes of *The School Library. Adult Series.*

Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
Chapter 1

Bibliographic Nationalism

Meredith McGill’s seminal study charting the development of a distinct national literature through the wide dissemination of cheap, often unauthorized reprints, what she calls an antebellum American “culture of reprinting” that claimed to foster democratic values through “republication,” is a useful reference point for understanding the foreign texts included in The School Library. As McGill observes, the traditional, author-centered “nationalist framework” of American literary criticism has tended to dismiss reprints in its search for “signs of an original, national difference” in literary productions. This emphasis, however, obscures the centrality of publishers, publishing formats, and distribution methods to antebellum literature, and too often overlooks “the ways in which foreign literature is repackaged and redeployed” by the practice of reprinting. To a degree, then, The School Library should be understood as cultivating national identity through similar practices, appropriating popular English texts long circulating in America. In particular, an edition such as Sarah J. Hale’s Things by Their Right Names demonstrates that foreign reprints were “not passive vehicles for the dissemination of European culture,” but rather were “sophisticated instrument[s] for projecting an image of a nation that is at once colonial and imperial.”

The volume’s title page suggests these dual impulses. In one sense, Hale assumes the mantle of her English foremother’s literary reputation, depending upon Barbauld’s international celebrity as both an author and an editor to enhance her own reputation as a woman of letters at home. She makes such a gesture in her edition’s preface: “There is no need of commending this Volume to the attention of the reader, or the approbation of the public. The name of Mrs. Barbauld will be a sufficient guarantee of the worth of the selection.” But if Barbauld’s name is “sufficient” to ensure the “worth” of her editor’s selections, in the act of declaring this, the preface nonetheless “commends” the worth of “this Volume” (my italics), thereby calling the “attention of the reader” to the material text edited by Hale (in contrast to the innumerable other editions of Barbauld’s work available in the United States). Indeed, the title page privileges Hale’s editorial role and suggests the edition’s distinction from other volumes on the basis of its literary nationalism. Even as Hale’s editing depends on Barbauld’s reputation, in other words, the title page simultaneously positions Hale as the ultimate arbiter of Barbauld’s worth on this side of the Atlantic. It indicates that these writings have been “Selected and Arranged,” adapted for American readers by Hale, whom the title also takes pains to point out is a resident expert of sorts on the matter, having penned “Sketches of American Character.” (See figure 1.3.)
THINGS
BY THEIR RIGHT NAMES,
AND OTHER
STORIES, FABLES, AND MORAL PIECES,
IN PROSE AND VERSE,
SELECTED AND ARRANGED FROM THE
WRITINGS OF MRS. BARBAULD.

WITH
A SKETCH OF HER LIFE,
BY MRS. S. J. HALE,
AUTHOR OF ‘SKETCHES OF AMERICAN CHARACTER,’ ‘LADIES’
WREATH,’ ETC. ETC.

“Bright-eyed Fancy, hovering o’er,
Scatters, from her pictured urn,
Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn.”

BOSTON:
MARSH, CAPEN, LYON, AND WEBB.
1840.
Similarly, Hale’s new “Sketch of Barbauld’s life” appropriates biographical details to provide readers with temporal and geographical contrasts on which to found a sense of American national identity derived from England. For instance, when Hale remarks upon Barbauld’s marriage, she recounts the story of Barbauld’s husband’s grandfather, who experienced religious oppression because he was a Protestant. As a small child, the grandfather “fled to England during the persecutions of Louis the Fourteenth,” having been “enclosed in a cask, and put on board a vessel” headed across the channel (Things by Their Right Names, 11). Recounting this removal, Hale opines: “People were not then allowed, in France, and many other European countries, to choose the mode of worshipping God, which their conscience dictated; and even children were taken from their parents, and otherwise punished, if they were thought to be heretics. We, in our own free country, can hardly understand how such things were allowed” (11). In juxtaposing “then” and there (eighteenth-century “France, and many other European countries”) with here and now (the “free country” of the United States whose citizens can barely comprehend a time when such abuses “were allowed”), Hale articulates what was, by the mid-nineteenth century, a hoary rhetorical distinction between the feudal prejudices of Europe and the progressive values of a “New World” that cherishes religious liberty. Even so, she positions the United States as extension and apotheosis of those freedoms that Barbauld’s grandfather had sought in England, the country from which the nation had since gained independence.

But the cultural contrasts posited by the book’s textual editors go beyond conventional formulations to assertions about the “matter of the text,” in this instance how the edition’s reprinting of Barbauld’s work functions to signal its “Americanness” to readers. Self-consciously pointing to its own textual materiality as a distinguishing feature between European and American cultures, the edition includes the story “The Manufacture of Paper,” from Barbauld’s Evenings at Home. It describes a conversation between Father and his son, Henry, about a “delicate and beautiful substance” manufactured from “the meanest and most disgusting materials,” rags from the poor, “carefully picked from dunghills, or bought from servants by Jews” (71). In what one might term a moment of “bibliographic nationalism,” the sketch commences with a peculiar footnote by the series’ editor, Joseph W. Ingraham, informing readers about the differences in the two cultures’ paper-production practices: “The manner of procuring the rags for the manufacture of paper, described in this dialogue, is not the same in America as in Europe. Here, in America, we have no persons so very poor as to be obliged to wear old rags for cloth-
Nor are there any Jews, who go about to pick up rags to sell. We should be thankful, that we live in a country where none need be so very poor” (71). Articulating a self-delusion not uncommon to nineteenth-century American expressions of patriotism, Ingraham thus claims that the United States, as embodied in its paper-making industries, had grown beyond the kinds of economic and racial exploitation that still characterize European society, that its paper is not “so very poor” as Europe’s precisely because superior cultural practices are reflected in that paper’s production.

Similarly, in an editor’s note at the end of the sketch, Ingraham informs the reader that “almost an entire revolution has taken place” in paper making since the initial publication of Barbauld’s story (76). The “revolution” he evokes is not just technological, involving the mechanization of paper making in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, but also sociopolitical; it indicates the country’s break from Europe, embodied in its move away from the traditional source of paper fiber, linen rags, to a more “American” fiber source, cotton, processed through modern innovations envisioned as progress, or an American “revolution” in the old ways. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton slowly began to replace linen in the West as the most common source of paper fiber, and, by the 1840s, it accounted for 65 percent of the fiber content in books.54 While Ingraham thus denies the existence of poverty and exploitation in America and elevates American manufactures as a reflection of superior national character, Ingraham overlooks the fact that the paper and book industries thrived in large part thanks to the fruit of southern slave labor and the products of that peculiarly American institution, chattel race slavery. This omission subversively points to what is another, if unintended, feature of American culture and character: an often unfounded exceptionalism that, like the texts it appropriated and the transatlantic publishing practices it reproduced, had little to separate it from Europe beyond a gnawing national anxiety of influence.

But even as Ingraham’s similarly problematic and anti-Semitic comments about European Jews—“Here, in America . . . nor are there any Jews, who go about to pick up rags”—suggest the nativism inherent in his praise of U.S. paper making, the practice of importing, reprinting, disseminating, and consuming texts by English authors about English life constitutes a kind of “Anglophilia” that, at first glance, appears at odds with a sensibility predicated on America’s separation from Europe. Yet Elisa Tamarkin has argued that U.S. nationalism “works every bit as seriously at bringing some aspects of the outside in, as it does at keeping others out,” and that, consequently, “Americans adore England as part of their national character.”55 Anglophilia and
anti-Semitism, therefore, are not contradictory impulses, but acts of “bringing in” and “keeping out” consonant with the promotion of Anglo-American identity derived from both white racial and English cultural roots even as it comes to constitute a unique national character. The publication of books such as *Things by Their Right Names*, whose title purports to distinguish between nations even as its appropriation of Barbauld’s similarly titled story aligns the two cultures, can be read as part of a practice by which, as Tamarkin describes it, Americans evinced nostalgia for the stability of English cultural forms amidst the threat of democratic political and social diversity, and as the basis of a new patriotism that grew as England’s own power over America diminished. In this moment, then, the editor’s anti-Semitism mediates the relationship between Anglophilia and nativism; the Jew becomes a symbol of an ethnically and racially diverse Europe whose predatory social practices the United States rejects. As an expression of nativist angst at the waves of unwanted European immigrants flooding the United States in the antebellum decades, the footnote thus construes a homogenous Anglo-American citizenry as a moral imperative necessary for the production of an egalitarian society, one unaffiliated with Europe’s diverse peoples and fractured identities, as well as the exploitative practices resulting from exchange between races.

A fierce advocate for precisely this sort of cohesive national identity, Mann himself often complained about the dangers of schoolbooks appearing in all “sizes, types, [and] mechanical execution,” his reasons for seeking uniformity going “deeper” than problems with “workmanship” (“District School Libraries,” 68) to ideological fears about the enervating effects of cultural pluralism. Taking as its premise what it calls the “evil of diversity” aggravated by the wide assortment of books in use from district to district, Mann’s discussion of “Books” in his *Fourth Annual Report* suggests that uniformity is “so important” precisely because without it “a school loses its collective character, and becomes a promiscuous company of individuals” (*Fourth Annual Report*, 63, 61). Hence Mann hopes his district school library will spread moral conformity to the heterogeneous masses beyond the schoolroom proper, since these individuals would otherwise have an atomizing and alienating influence on the new nation, rending its moral fabric at a most precarious moment in its existence. The description of uniformly produced schoolbooks encouraging a “collective character” in readers further explains his demand for plain and substantial library volumes, designed as they were not simply to resist but also to transform the “promiscuous circulation” of mass literary dissemination. Unlike other institutions that tended, as Mann says in an editorial, to
reflect the growing “spirit of party” infecting the nation, the common school and its organs such as the district school library are an “antidote” to the fractious diversity of American life. Ultimately, only these institutions are “capacious enough to receive and cherish in [their] parental bosom every child that comes into the world.”

The imperial dimensions of *The School Library*, as it promoted moral and cultural homogeneity by seeking to assimilate into its bosom every child, is registered in its *Juvenile Series*’ frontispiece. Appearing below the series title, the engraving depicts three young boys lounging beneath a tree, each absorbed in a book. In this manner, the image performs the advertisements’ and the introductory essay’s insistence that the work of the library is beyond the classroom, being composed of “reading, and not school” books for those times when it is “desirable” for children to “unbend” from the schoolhouse (”Introductory Essay,” xlvi). But “unbend” is precisely what the books are designed not to allow the boys to do, in so far as such a term implies escape from the lessons of the classroom. Rather, the engraving suggests *The School Library*’s domesticating impulse, its hope to mold “the world” outside the classroom in accordance with the ideals of bourgeois literacy. Equally significant is the depiction of the boys’ features, their cherubic characters revealing themselves in the iconography of pudgy, half-robed forms common since the Renaissance. In this context, the frontispiece embodies not only the power of reading to mold character for good or ill, but also *The School Library*’s ability to turn the nation’s diverse and potentially disruptive masses into the uniform mold of the virtuous little angel. More important still is the racial inflection of this transformation, since, as the engraving suggests, the Americans for whom the library is produced will be transformed into a reflection of whiteness, constructed as a universal standard of moral and intellectual worth. (See figure 1.5.)

In delineating *The School Library*’s racial project, I do not mean to obscure the complexities of Mann’s politics, either his commitment to causes such as abolition (which he would champion in full force when elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1848), or his moral fortitude in resisting practices such as school segregation while Secretary of Education. For instance, when a young African-American woman named Chloe Lee enrolled in the West Newton Normal School in 1847 but then could not find any one among the community willing to provide a black student with room and board, Mann and his wife took her into their own home. Rather, *Things by Their Right Names*, and series to which it belongs, reveals the way in which Mann’s efforts to standardize education for local and national markets and to
“Plainly” and “substantially” bound volumes of *The School Library. Juvenile Series*.

Courtesy of Special Collections, Monroe C. Gutman Library, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
Figure 1.5
cultivate a sense of shared national heritage among a diverse populace produces a troubling racialization of “culture” ensuring that readers of all stripes “learn to be white.” Simultaneously, The School Library encourages the conflation of supposedly white culture with democracy itself since, in its material production, it aimed both to capture what its architects saw as the nation’s egalitarian spirit and to encourage its books’ dissemination throughout the ranks of American society.  

One of Barbauld’s sketches, titled “On Manufactures,” reproduced in Things by Their Right Names, encapsulates the series’ impulses. In it, Henry asks his father the meaning of the aforementioned term, declaring: “I remember, the other day, at dinner, a gentleman said, that Mr. Pica had manufactured a large volume, in less than a fortnight” (Things by their Right Names, 40; emphasis in original). Henry’s father replies: “It was meant to convey a satirical remark on his book, because it was compiled from other authors, from whom he had taken a page in one place, and a page in another; so that it was not produced by the labor of his brain, but of his hands” (41). Selected by Hale and presented without comment by Ingraham in Things by Their Right Names, this exchange might be read as a meta-commentary on The School Library’s efforts to self-consciously, willfully, and literally produce an “American” identity out of the materials of English culture. While Barbauld satirically lampoons the piratical habits of English editors, Hale’s reprinting of Barbauld’s stories redeploy such moments for nationalist purposes. In the process, her editions suggest that the creation of American literary culture is not so much the unique production of authors’ “brains,” or their “genius” as Father calls it earlier in the story, as of the skilled “hands” of democratic publishers and editors who compile texts for the sake of an Anglophone nation.

Precisely because a text’s material production was thought not only to reflect the moral worth of its contents and its purchasers’ taste, but also to “create one’s character, inculcating or undermining culture and virtue in accordance with [its] moral and aesthetic properties,” American editors and publishers commonly declaimed upon the importance of well-produced books, even as they engaged in reprinting. When, for instance, Nahum Capen complained to Congress in 1844 about the lack of international copyright, he warned that the careless reprints proliferating in its absence stood to degrade national character. Without the “responsible ownership” encouraged by copyright, books were “reprinted on poor paper, small type, and put into binding that rather serves to hide their blurred pages, than to protect fair ones; and thus millions of volumes of standard works are produced and sold, which serve but to weaken the eyes of the people, or to refill the vat of the paper-
maker.” In a business whose products both reflected and determined the state of American character, a book’s materiality therefore could affect not only a citizen’s intellectual penetration, his or her ability to “see” what the book is about, but also, and quite literally, a citizen’s physical health as well.

If the Board and its publisher hoped The School Library might combat the enervating influences of poorly produced literature, conversely, Mann also confronted the perils of lavish productions. In his Third Report, Mann describes the typical contents of household libraries, suggesting that danger in reading rests less with the laborer who could afford few books beyond a family Bible, than with those of more abundant means. While one might find “really useful and instructive books” in some wealthy households, in too many others, “where wealth is, unfortunately, united with a love of display,” one undoubtedly found questionable material, such as “elegantly-bound Annuals, and novels of a recent emission” (120–21). Mann’s feelings on fiction are well documented—he called it a medium for “unchastened imaginations and perverted morals” (“On District School Libraries,” 295)—but I am interested in the way he characterizes the materiality of “Annuals,” those sumptuously produced holiday gift-books exchanged as tokens between friends or loved ones. Rather than chastising annuals for their fictional contents, however, he excoriates them for elegant bindings and costly appearances. Conflating this elegance with ephemerality, he then classes annuals with novels whose primary sin is their “recent emission,” the fact that they are not enduring. Indeed, the problem with annuals was that the genre itself was annual rather than perennial. Their contents changing from year to year, annuals thus enshrined novelty in precious packaging rather than protecting time-tested works of literature. That they functioned within an economy of sentimental exchange obscuring their commercial nature only made matters worse. Although thought uplifting in function, annuals served little purpose, Mann suggests, beyond sensual gratification, their expense testifying merely to their purchaser’s or owner’s lavish tastes. With retail prices ranging from $3 to $15, they were as much signs of affluence as of affection; one historian characterizes their cost as a “constant reminder of their exclusive character. Not many a brother, husband, or lover could afford to pay at least $3 for a little book.”

At least one of The School Library’s contributors shared these concerns about luxury and reading. Published as the juvenile series’ first volume, Emma Embury’s Pictures of Early Life (1839) is, like Barbauld’s work, a “domestic literacy narrative,” a collection of stories about mothers teaching their children to read, in which literacy is understood as a “set of ideologically charged social practices” enabling children to decode texts in such a way as to rein-
force proper values and behaviors.\textsuperscript{64} In “A Day’s Pleasure” (the second story in the collection), a girl named Mary Herbert eagerly visits her mother’s affluent friend and her two daughters, Sarah and Elizabeth Ellison, only to learn an important lesson about the disappointments of wealth and privilege. Embury signals Mary’s developing literacy in not only her taste for reading—one of the first things she asks the girls to see is their books—but also in her ability to read books by their covers, correctly discerning the moral and social significance of texts in their material appearances. As if Embury were channeling Mann’s disdain for the private libraries of the wealthy, Mary finds in the rich girls’ drawing room a “marble table covered with annuals and prints,” which, to her great dismay, are “all so costly and magnificent, that she feared to touch them.”\textsuperscript{65} In this way, Mary, whose middle-class upbringing offers the “comforts, but very few of the luxuries, of life” (33; emphasis in original), and whose chaste sensibilities thus match her family’s moderate means, recoils from a “display of wealth” (33) so similar to that “love of display” Mann deplores in the annuals littering the libraries of wealthy households.

Making explicit what he only hints at in his \textit{Third Report}, the description of the Ellisons’ annuals calls attention to opulence considered un-American; the story associates such extremes of wealth with a foreign social order unsuited to the more equitable distribution characterizing life in the United States. When Mary first arrives at Mrs. Ellison’s estate, for example, she compares the family’s “luxury” to a “scene of enchantment” right out of the Orient, involuntarily juxtaposing their mansion’s splendor with “the palace raised by Aladdin’s lamp” (33). Like Ingraham in “The Manufacture of Paper,” the story invokes a contrast between Europe and America, here rooted in the families’ different material circumstances. Mrs. Herbert and Mrs. Ellison grew up together, but “their course through life had been so different” that they now only “rarely exchanged visits” (33), and their daughters follow similarly divergent paths. Their family’s riches increasing “almost daily” (33), Sarah and Elizabeth receive a continental education; “brought up, from infancy, by a Swiss nurse,” educated “under a French governess,” and molded into “perfect miniatures of women of fashion,” even their “dress, their manners, their very accent were foreign,” so much so that “no one would have ever suspected them of being American children” (34). While they express “contempt” (35) for Mary’s traveling dress, Embury clearly positions their appearance as inferior to the protagonist’s garb, despite their scorn: their “silk dresses, embroidered pantalettes seemed quite disgraced by her neat muslin dress and plain apron; and [Mary] wished herself home again” (34). Although Mary feels embarrassment at the sight of her clothing, being “quite morti-
A variation on the “plain” and “substantial” bindings of *The School Library* itself, the contrast between Mary’s “neat” and “plain” attire and the Ellison girls’ excesses is also manifest in the two families’ divergent pedagogical practices, embodied in their selection of schoolbooks. After leaving the annual-strewn table, Mary asks to see their books, and immediately a quantity of richly bound volumes, containing Conversations on Botany, Dialogues on Political Economy, Elements of Geography, Diversions in Chemistry, etc. were put into her hands. Mary had been carefully instructed by her mother in all those branches, which a child of twelve years of age might be supposed capable of advantageously acquiring; but her new friends, although of an equal age, had been subjected to the hotbed process of a more fashionable education, and a smattering of every kind of knowledge had been made to serve the purposes of more useful information. Mary was abashed at her own inferiority; and after an ineffectual attempt to understand their philosophical books, relinquished all hope of deriving amusement from their library. (35)

As with the girls’ clothes, Embury attacks the “fashionable” education these books represent. When Mary rejects the volumes, relinquishing “all hope” of finding “amusement” in them, she enacts what *The School Library*’s architects had warned was the child’s response to dry and incomprehensible texts not designed for his or her use. While Mary’s own studies are no less varied, ranging from geography to arithmetic to lessons in domestic economy (27), what distinguishes her education is her mother’s method: Mrs. Herbert “carefully” instructs her daughter in only the most “useful information” necessary to her “moral education” (28). Unlike Mrs. Herbert’s judicious selection of reading material, adapted to her twelve-year-old daughter’s moral development, Mrs. Ellison’s “smattering” is the product of an indiscriminate diffusion of knowledge that Embury fears might be as damaging as no diffusion at all. In contrasting the two families’ practices, therefore, Embury collapses the materiality of the girls’ “richly bound volumes” with their mother’s lax pedagogical principles, their library embodying a material and moral excess that inculcates extravagance in the girls rather than self-discipline. Ultimately, Embury positions the library as an un-American one, suggesting that it serves only to
encourage social divisions (producing in Mary, for example, a mistaken sense of her own “inferiority” compared with the Ellison girls) rather than the sort of homogenous cultural identity the nation badly needed to assert its superiority on the world stage. What the Ellison girls require, in other words, is not a “hotbed” of “fashionable” texts or pedagogies imported from abroad, but rather the thoroughly “American” values embodied in the well-adapted and yet sensibly produced volumes of The School Library itself, including Embury’s own text, since it first appeared in that series.

Conclusion: “Grandest Moral Enterprise”

In a journal entry for 14 September 1841, Horace Mann records a conversation with two gentlemen of Lowell, superintendents of some “of the larger establishments in that city,” as he drummed up support for his proposed educational reforms. “My object,” he tells them, “is to show that education has a market value; that it is so far an article of merchandise, that it may be turned to a pecuniary account; it may be minted and will yield a larger amount of statutable coin than common bullion. It has a pecuniary value, a price current.” Selling skeptical citizens on the practical benefits of reform, Mann thus envisions “intellectual and moral education” commodified like “an article of merchandise” through such literary efforts as The School Library. In this way, Mann hopes to convince them that the “respectability” this enterprise offers in exchange for their hard-earned dollars might then produce its own “returns of silver and gold,” rendering their material circumstances “superior” to those less educated.66 An editorial in the Common School Journal describes The School Library explicitly in these terms, calling its books “little treasuries of knowledge and wisdom” whose expense to purchase must “sink . . . when compared with the pecuniary advantage, to say nothing of the higher considerations of knowledge and virtue, that must and will be derived from the investment!”67

Early on, publishers also realized that education had a “market value,” to use Mann’s terms, and could be turned to “pecuniary account,” translating into “silver and gold” for those competent enough to produce and distribute it. Unfortunately, Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb would not reap the “returns” of their own “investment”: the recession following the Panic of 1837, and its lingering economic instabilities lasting into the early 1840s, ensured their financial collapse, as it had so many other small firms in those uncertain times. Although Webb had vowed to Sarah P. E. Hale in early 1841 that,
despite an unexpected “interruption in our business,” the firm would “proceed again with renewed vigor,” Hale was not convinced; she confessed to her brother that “poor” Webb “did not seem very sanguine.” They had, of course, experienced previous “interruptions” in the form of incessant partisan political assaults, including a failed vote by the legislature’s Democrats to abolish the Board of Education, and a halt in the sanctioning of books under the Democratic governor Marcus Morton in 1840. But, unlike the ebb and flow of antebellum politics, the firm could not escape the recent financial “hot water,” as Hale called it, that had put them “pretty much at a stand.” By February 1842, the firm had collapsed, managing to publish only 38 volumes of the series before bankruptcy halted further production. Mann told his friend, George Combe, that “sympathy for them is useless. They were dead, defunct, decomposed long ago,” and this despite a $1000 he had lent to them, much of it “quasi-stolen,” as he described it, because they had borrowed “without any prospect or possibility to pay.”

In late 1842, a squabble between Nahum Capen and Thomas Webb over the Board’s sanction further hindered the library, and, although it was neither the first nor the last controversy the series would see, the dispute suggests that publishers’ school libraries were fast becoming very competitive business. After their firm dissolved, Capen negotiated the rights to continue publishing Mann’s Common School Journal, while Webb retained the right to act as agent for The School Library. However, Capen’s new firm began advertising a “New Plan for the Supply of District Libraries” detailing five series published under its own imprint. Because he promoted this plan in his “Advertiser” for the Common School Journal, there was confusion in the mind of some readers as to whether he had the approbation of the Board in producing them. Webb launched an attack in the local papers, accusing him of falsely pretending to the sanction and insinuating that his own firm alone held the right to produce books for the state’s district school libraries. The situation appears to have gotten so bad that the Board distanced itself from it in its Sixth Annual Report, reaffirming their sanction of “the two series . . . in the hands of Thomas H. Webb and Co.,” while simultaneously clarifying that they did “not deny the right or the ability of other gentlemen to make other, and better selections” and “gladly would rather encourage than retard the sale of any libraries” which might help the young.

Harper & Brothers ultimately bought the copyright to most of the library’s volumes in 1846 and, integrating the series into their already-voluminous catalogue, sold it under a new title, The Massachusetts School Library. As a bigger, better-capitalized firm than their Boston competitor, they had
been able to weather the nation's economic downturn, and they had established a particularly strong presence in New York state, with its almost 11,000 school districts, for which they received the sole commission of the State Secretary to provide library books. As a private enterprise, Harper’s School District Library also was not as liable to the frequent political attacks and delays experienced by its New England counterpart (such as when Mann’s library was assaulted for its “whiggism” by Democratic localists wanting to abolish the Board, despite the reality of strong public and cross-denominational support for many of its positions). Together with the newly acquired Massachusetts School Library, then, such school library series cemented Harper’s growing influence in the antebellum market, and bolstered its rise to national prominence.  

Just as the Massachusetts School Library helped consolidate Harper’s cultural and financial capital, so too did its new publisher provide its authors with increased exposure and stable income. In October 1846, Thomas Webb wrote to Sarah P. E. Hale to inform her of the sale and transfer of her editions, telling her that, while “Authors & Editors have not reaped the benefit they should” from the enterprise owing to the numerous “obstacles” preventing it from proceeding “in the manner originally contemplated,” the works “will now be published, and large sales effected, so that you will hereafter without doubt receive considerable in the way of premium from the Works.” While Webb positions the transfer as long-deferred reward finally realized, Godey’s Lady’s Book had prophesied similarly about the bright prospects of The School Library in 1840: “To keep economy always in view, and yet to hold out sufficient inducements to employ the pen of some of the most eminent of our literati, male and female, is an undertaking which cannot fail of being duly appreciated.” While Godey’s seemed certain that the library’s democratic and literary nationalist aspirations would attract appreciation, the question of whether this would take the form of “considerable” compensation for “Authors & Editors,” as Webb puts it, was another matter. With the transfer of the library to its new publisher, however, it finally would.  

Although short-lived, the library’s history provides a glimpse at just how serious the business of educational publishing could get, especially when a market like Massachusetts was at stake. But even as its history reminds us that there was never a heyday when educational principle trumped profit, it also points to the way such private–public enterprises were crucial to the rise of professional authorship; while others have suggested the way pedagogical activities such as literacy training were catalysts for the growth of the novel and the legitimization of antebellum women writers, state-sanctioned enter-
prises like *The School Library* were important because they offered moral and ethical justifications for writing, and the lucrative markets to support it. As a state-sanctioned but privately published venture both produced and marketed in terms of sociability—as when its proponents pitched it to “friends of education” in America—it also anticipates more modern public–private enterprises such as the educational textbook industry. But if this hybridity opened such endeavors, in the nineteenth century no less than today, to accusations of cynical political self-interest, on the one hand, or cynical business self-interest, on the other, those involved in the enterprises internalized the moral logic that the series and their advertisements articulate, justifying participation in an industry in which success was most often illusive and fleeting. In other words, such moral language justified the inherent risks of the educational literature business as worth taking, on the part of both producers with no guarantee that consumers would buy their product and subscribers with no way of knowing whether the products they paid for would come to fruition. In the words of William Penn, from the series’ introduction: “For learning be liberal. Spare no cost; for by such parsimony all is lost that is saved” ("Introductory Essay," xviii; emphasis in original). Even those aspiring contributors whose works did not find their way into the library, such as Hawthorne, came to internalize its logic of bibliographic respectability, seeking the moral, cultural, and financial “gold” of “Americanized” children’s literature. Indeed, in the fledgling medium of children’s fiction validated by ventures such as *The School Library*, enterprising literary pedagogues saw a promising future; wreathed in “tender shoots and dewy buds, instead of such withered and dusty leaves as other people crown themselves with,” they hoped to enjoy both a “very pleasant and peculiar kind of reputation” and put “money in [their] purses” (*CE*, 15:266–67).