

Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada



Jonathan Senchyne, *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 194 pp., ISBN 978-1-62534-474-8 (paperback)

Geoffrey Robert Little

Volume 59, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094202ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v59i1.37495>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada

ISSN

0067-6896 (print)
2562-8941 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Little, G. (2022). Review of [Jonathan Senchyne, *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 194 pp., ISBN 978-1-62534-474-8 (paperback)]. *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada*, 59, 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/pbsc.v59i1.37495>

© Geoffrey Robert Little, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

REVIEWS

Jonathan Senchyne, *The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 194 pp., ISBN 978-1-62534-474-8 (paperback)

Reviewed by GEOFFREY ROBERT LITTLE
Concordia University

The first page of Jonathan Senchyne's book about paper quotes Ronald McKerrow's 1927 *Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Studies*, which tells trainee bibliographers that "knowledge of the processes by which paper is manufactured and of the substances of which it is composed has never ... been regarded as necessary" (1). The goal of Senchyne, now an associate professor in the Information School and the director of the Center for the History of Print and Digital Culture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is to prove McKerrow wrong. His central argument, woven throughout this book and its case studies, is that from the dawn of the American republic until the end of the 1860s, readers, writers, publishers, and booksellers were deeply and acutely aware of the paper – specifically rag paper – that they used for writing, printing, and reading. As a result, bibliographers as well as literary scholars need to pay much more attention to rag paper and the ways by which it created and enabled intimacy or closeness between communities of authors, publishers, and readers.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most of the paper consumed by readers in what is now the United States was rag paper – that is, paper made from cotton, linen, or hemp. Rags made of these materials were sorted, cleaned, treated, shredded, and then added to water to create a slurry called *stuff*. Using a wood-and-mesh tray, a

papermaker would gather up a quantity of stuff, which would produce a mat of interwoven fibres. Once pressed, dried, and treated, this became paper. Papermaking required immense quantities of materials, water, and sustained labour. As a result, rag paper was expensive and often hard to acquire.

The primary aim of Senchyne's study is not to produce a history of rag paper; rather, he seeks to restore an awareness of rag paper within American literary studies and book-historical studies, fields which he claims have privileged the physical object of the book over the material on which it was printed. *The Intimacy of Paper* is organized in four chapters and a conclusion, and engages with the various uses of rag paper by contemporary book artists and creators. Chapter 1, "Paper Publics and Material Textual Affiliations in American Print Culture," explores what might be described as communities created by rag paper in the Early Republic (c. 1780–1830) which until that point had relied on imported paper from Europe. Essential to the new country's newspapers, circulars, and publications, rag paper was also strongly gendered as female, in published notices seeking rags, government directives to homemakers, or meditations by papermakers. Rags that had once touched, or even caressed, female bodies were gathered by women and made ready for the paper vat. Women made important contributions at home, as wives and mothers, but they could also nurture the new country by providing rags for paper.

Chapter 2, "The Gender of Rag Paper in Anne Bradstreet and Lydia Sigourney," continues Senchyne's successful attempt to better situate women within the history of American paper, as well as authorship. Both Bradstreet (1612–72) and Sigourney (1791–1865) were criticized for publishing their writing and presenting themselves as authors to their reading publics. They also faced scorn from their families for ignoring their domestic duties. To Bradstreet, however, as she expressed in her poem "The Author to Her Book," her texts were her children, formed by her, birthed in rag paper, and raised for her readers. Sigourney, who wrote a series of poems devoted to cloth, used cloth production as an opportunity to address women's labour and agency. Her poem "To a Shread of Linen" is narrated by someone who

imagines how a piece of linen was used before it was sent to the mill and transformed into paper. Death, sorrows, tears, or cares absorbed by the pillowcase are redeemed at the mill, turning the scraps of linen into the paper used to craft and then publish any number of immortal lines. Women helped to produce rag paper but they also consumed it, as authors and writers.

Senchyne's third chapter, "The Ineffable Socialities of Rags in Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville," explores new relationships with industrially made paper produced in the large paper mills of New England. Authors like Thoreau (1817–62) and Melville (1819–91) grappled with America's rapid industrialization and urbanization, and they articulated their discontent on the page. These tensions are best displayed in Melville's 1855 novella "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." Senchyne reminds us that Melville consumed massive amounts of paper during the writing of *Moby Dick*, in 1850–51. Living in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, where ample waterways and cheap labour also meant many paper mills, Melville could buy direct from the source. While the first half of the novella takes place in a London gentleman's club, the second unfolds at a New England paper mill where young women (the maids) shred shirts that once belonged to bachelors – perhaps even those who appeared earlier in the narrative. Their working conditions, which Melville saw first-hand, are appalling, but the story takes a bizarre turn as the rags are absorbed by the women's bodies, thus uniting the bachelors and the maids.

Chapter 4, "The Whiteness of the Page: Racial Legibility and Authenticity," is an important contribution to understanding how language and discourse around paper purity mirrored similar language used to create and uphold racialized differences in nineteenth-century America. Here, Senchyne explores the anxiety among those who wanted to produce or consume only the whitest paper. He also looks at how racialized bodies were created and transmitted in print. In "The Girl Who Inked Herself, and Her Books, and What Happened," a short fable composed of rhyming couplets published around 1859, the reader is told of "Miss Mopsa," a young white girl whose careless habits cause

her to spill her inkpot onto her spelling book. The ink soils everything around her, including her body, and her transformation from white to black employs racialized tropes and slurs. Her horrified parents reject their daughter and they sell her as a ragdoll. A reproduction of an image printed with the story (132) shows Miss Mopsa before her accident (beautiful, well-dressed, white) and after (shrunk, emaciated, a caricatured black body). The moral of the story is the last line of the fable: “Never stain yourself with ink.” Senchyne also shows how *Clotel*, the eponymous heroine of William Wells Brown’s 1853 novel about Thomas Jefferson’s enslaved daughter, was described in the text as being light-skinned yet depicted in illustrations as dark-skinned. Here, Senchyne engages with nineteenth-century printing technology (as well as artists) that could not distinguish between lighter- and darker-skinned Black women. A duality was created whereby there were only two kinds of bodies in mid-nineteenth-century American literature: Black and white.

The book’s conclusion ends by engaging with twentieth-century book artists, specifically individuals who served in the American military and who articulated their experiences into handmade paper and books. This is a significant temporal jump from the nineteenth century, but Senchyne does so to show that contemporary American book creators are still engaged with small-batch handmade paper and the emotions it conveys, absorbs, and carries. This part of the book could be its own study, and it feels disjointed and not well connected to the chapters that precede it. That small criticism aside, this is an important and engaging work of scholarship. Early in his study, Senchyne tells his reader that “every sheet of paper is an archive of human labour” (14). He has succeeded in proving this claim, but he has also succeeded in centring female authors, people of colour, individuals involved in the rag trade, and other previously marginalized actors within the literary history of American paper and papermaking.

Copyright © 2022 Geoffrey Robert Little. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).