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Recovering George D. Prentice: The Lost Mentor of Sarah Piatt

George D. Prentice [1802-1870] was the highly renowned editor of the popular and influential political newspaper, the *Louisville Journal*, from 1830-1868. In a memorial address written for Prentice after his death and presented before the legislature of Kentucky in 1870, Henry Watterson stated, “I found in London that [Prentice’s] fame is exceeded by that of no American writer; but the journalists of Paris, where there is still nothing but personal journalism, considered him a few years ago as the solitary journalist of genius among us” (14-15). In 1898, Kate Sanborn exclaimed, “he was, without question, the most popular and influential newspaper writer of whom we have any record” (242). Yet today, both he and his newspaper are largely forgotten by history. There is, however, currently a critical movement working to recover lesser-known periodicals, and to trace their impact on literary history. There is also a literary movement, spearheaded by Paula Bernat Bennett, to bring recognition and critical acclaim to another forgotten writer - a poet named Sarah Piatt [1836-1919]; she is, Bennett claims, after Emily Dickinson, the “nineteenth-century American woman poet most appealing to readers today” (Bennett, Preface xix). As I will reveal, George D. Prentice, Sarah Piatt, and the *Louisville Journal* were all intimately connected. It was Prentice who discovered Sarah¹ as a poet, and who was the first to publish her numerous times in his *Louisville Journal*, a paper with a wide literary as well as political reputation. Without Prentice and his influence, Sarah’s career as a poet might have been vastly diminished, and her currently rising critical standing made non-existent.

¹ As two separate Piatts will be mentioned several times throughout the paper, I will most often refer to Sarah Piatt as “Sarah” and her husband, John James Piatt as “J. J.” to avoid confusion.

Prentice, unlike Sarah, was not born a native to Kentucky; he also, unlike Sarah, was not born to a life of wealth and privilege. He was, in fact, born on a farm in Connecticut in December of 1802. He appears to have had quite a keen intellect and showed a great aptitude for study at an early age. Even though his parents' monetary means were not large, they decided that, due to Prentice's large intellectual promise, he should be allowed to try for college. This decision came rather late in his youth, and Prentice had to study rigorously to make up the educational time that he had lost due to his work on the farm. Yet, even this potential stumbling block proved to be no hurdle to Prentice, as he easily made up over two years of course work in a matter of six months. At the age of fourteen, Prentice, having succeeded admirably in his school work, obtained a position as a schoolteacher. Two years later he was able to enroll in Brown University where he excelled and graduated in 1823. After college, Prentice attained a law degree and began practicing, but he soon after moved into active journalism (Piatt, "Biographical Sketch" vii-x).

Prentice flourished in his newfound career, and by 1828 he had become the successful editor of *The New England Review*; under his tutelage it became a powerful political newspaper for the Whig party (Piatt, "Biographical Sketch" xi). So great was his success that in 1830 the Whig party of Connecticut asked Prentice to go to Kentucky to write a biography for Henry Clay, one of the most prominent Whig politicians in the country. The book ultimately did not prove a triumph, but it did bring him to Louisville, KY where he began his greatest literary endeavor.

In 1830, Prentice founded and became the editor for the *Louisville Journal*; his work with the *Journal* would eventually make him one of the most well-known and influential newspaper editors in the country (Browne 192). The *Louisville Journal*, like its predecessor, *The New*

England Review, was founded as a political newspaper for the Whig party, and it gathered extraordinary influence. Although its greatest years of power were between 1840 and 1860, the *Journal* was still highly regarded for more than two decades after its termination (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xviii). In 1881, W. H. Perrin wrote that the *Journal* was a “paper that for more than a third of a century wielded perhaps a greater influence than any newspaper ever published in the United States” (57). Its influence was due mainly to the efforts of George D. Prentice. Henry Watterson said, “from 1830-1861 the influence of Prentice was greater than the influence of any political writer of the time” (13).² In 1869, Charles Shanks called Prentice a man that once “held the people of the Southwest in the hollow of his hand;” he “thought and decided” for many of his readers and “his politics became theirs” (552).

Prentice was not an editor in the modern sense of the word; not only was he responsible for the layout of the paper and the articles that went into it, he was also a frequent writer and contributor to the paper as well (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xviii). Indeed, due to his writings in the *Louisville Journal*, Prentice was accounted one of the greatest “wits” of the age. His “wit” came in the form of short, sarcastic, epigrammatic paragraphs that would denigrate even the proudest of the nation’s citizens. These paragraphs were immensely popular, being “copied and repeated far and wide. They went everywhere. London and Paris papers made frequent quotations of them” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xviii). Sanborn, in her 1898 book, “My favorite Lecture of Long Ago, for Friends who Remember,” wrote a chapter about the greatest

² It is important to understand that the nature of newspapers in the antebellum period was quite different than in modern times. According to Jean M. Lutes, it was only *after* the Civil War that field reporters and fact-oriented reporting became the norm as a demand grew for objective reporting (97, 103). Before the Civil War, news and editorial/opinionated writing were much more fused and joined. The *Louisville Journal* was a political newspaper and as such its stories and views were understandably biased. The bias of the newspapers allowed its editors to have large amounts of influence, as objectivity was not an issue.

newspaper wits of her age. She stated, “as a brilliant journalist and versatile genius none can rank higher than George D. Prentice” (241).

Prentice wielded his wit with aplomb in the adversarial arena of conflicting opinions that existed amongst antebellum political newspapers. According to Browne, Prentice understood that a willingness to fight and be fought with was inherently part of the business of being a newspaper editor (192). Browne quoted Prentice as saying, “If I were known as a man of peace in Louisville, I should be warred on continually. My enemies would do the fighting, and I the skulking, which is not, I confess, to my taste. When you live in a fighting community, you must, if you do not wish to fight a great deal, fight hard and quick when you have reason to” (192). Prentice appears to have been merciless when provoked as he “never failed to hit back, generally a heavier blow than he had received. His stinging satire made him many foes, and he seldom restrained it” (Browne 192). Prentice’s wit “could strike with a rapier or a bludgeon, and there was little mercy for editors who attacked him” (Sanborn 243).

And yet, for all his ferocity, Prentice knew when amiability could be as great a weapon as wit. “He had the fearless courage – always mingled with generosity and good humor – necessary; and, not shrinking from the ordeal, he went through it — making enemies often, but generally in the end making these enemies, if they were worthy ones, his friends” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xiii). Browne echoed this sentiment in 1891 when he wrote that Prentice “had the high quality of courage, which will not strike a fallen foe under any circumstances. He waged his battles stoutly and stubbornly; but having gained the advantage, he sheathed the sword until a new issue had arisen. After almost any strife, however long or severe, he was ready to go half-way toward reconciliation” (192). Through all of the various arguments and “inky warfare” that Prentice participated in, his “gleaming, penetrating style, his brief, concentrated humor or

pungent wit and sarcasm” helped both him and his newspaper remain fresh and potent throughout its long years of publication (Browne 192; Sanborn 241-242).

In addition to being a political newspaper filled with wit and verbal warfare, the *Louisville Journal* also dedicated its pages to literary pursuits, particularly poetry. “It gained, and for many years retained, a large literary reputation, especially as an avenue to the public for young poetical writers” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxii). Indeed, “the poetry of the paper was held to be as valuable an attraction as its politics” (Halstead 710). Prentice was himself a poet of some renown; but he gave up writing poetry as a career when he began to pursue journalism seriously (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxv-xxvi). His love of poetry never seemed to leave him, however, and Prentice ensured that *The Louisville Journal* became a publishing home for many different poets, particularly female poets. “There must have been at times a dozen ladies, each with the gift of song, contributing to the beautifully-printed pages of the *Journal of Louisville*” (Halstead, 710). Shanks states that the reputations of Alice and Phoebe Cary were based upon the poetry they published in the *Journal*; other well-known female antebellum poets appearing in its pages included Amelia Welby, Lydia Sigourney, Elizabeth Conwell Smith, Mrs. A. Warfield, and Rosa Vertner Johnson (Shanks 552; Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxii). Susan Grove Hall states that “women’s experience . . . held special value for the editor” which led him to publish a “significant amount of women’s poetry that fit his aesthetic vision” (225); it was a vision based upon placing importance on the “music of poetry” such as found in the works of Byron and the Romantics (224).

It was in 1854, a time in Prentice’s life when he sat upon the apex of his power and prestige, that Sallie M. Bryan (Sarah Piatt, as she was known before her marriage) entered his life and his literary tradition of publishing female poetry. She was a young girl, only eighteen

years old, attending the nearby Henry Female College, and, until this time, her poetry had been almost completely unpublished.³ By 1855 she had become a regular contributor of original poetry to the *Louisville Journal*. Hall argues that Sarah became the “latest and last successor to Amelia Ball Coppuck Welby as the *Louisville Daily Journal*’s celebrated writer of personal lyrics of nature and romance” (223). But her poetry in the *Journal* was also different than her contemporaries. It was in this newspaper that Sarah first began experimenting with dramatic personae, and where she began to employ the irony that would be a hallmark of her later mature poetry.⁴ Prentice realized that Sarah was beginning to do something unique in her poetry and with a talent that he had rarely seen.

His recognition of her uniqueness prompted Prentice to write a remarkable letter to Sarah in December of 1855; the letter reveals Prentice’s views on Sarah and her poetry; it also, subtly, explores facets of Sarah’s personality. The letter begins, “I am glad that my brief letter was gratifying to you. Having heard that you are a little cynical I did not know how you would receive it” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxiv). The text indicates that this is not Prentice’s first letter to Sarah. His characterization of her is intriguing; Sarah was only nineteen when she received this letter, but apparently she was already known for her cynicism. In addition to cynicism, Prentice proceeds then to discuss Sarah’s melancholy – a sadness that had begun to show through in her poetry.

Any inherent depression or sensitivity in Sarah was sharpened by the details of her young life. Sarah lost her mother at a very early age; after her mother’s death, Sarah was shifted

³ Before publishing in the *Louisville Journal*, Sarah had only had a few poems published in the *Galveston News* in 1854 (Bennett, Introduction xxiv).

⁴ Hall argues that while most women poets in the *Louisville Journal* voiced personal experiences and emotions while “asserting both poetic and spiritual authority,” (231) Sarah “expanded the subjective voice into a dramatic persona she deconstructed into a fragmentary consciousness of illusory psychic, moral, and spiritual identity” (242) imbuing her poetry with its first tinges of irony.

between various relatives before finally settling down with an aunt in New Castle, KY (B., S. G., “Piatt, Sarah” 557). The death of her mother and the subsequent instability of her life appear to have had a large influence on her emotional state. Frances Willard and Mary Livermore, writing in 1897, explain that “the loss of her mother, with various consequent influences, lent to a very sensitive nature a hue of sadness not easy to outgrow” (569). This moroseness extended into her poetry, and the “hue of sadness” was “observable . . . in her writings early and late” (Willard and Livermore, 569).

Criticism of Sarah’s later poetry often notes the sadness in her works (Terris, 388). In his letter, Prentice in no way denies that her early poetry also bears a melancholy tone, but rather than censure her, Prentice acknowledges her feelings while also trying to help her find a focus and channel for them. He writes:

It was far from my design to suggest to you not to write poetry in your hours of sadness. We must all have hours of mournful feelings and probably it is the case with most poets that their somber and melancholy thoughts and reflections are more essentially poetical than their joyous ones. I would have you utter all the poetical thoughts that arise in your soul except the morbid and misanthropic ones. A tender sorrow is as healthful as joy, and as beautiful. Strike all that is sad from the works of our greatest poets, and their fame would be more than half destroyed.

(xxiv)

Now, this could be an example of Prentice trying to make Sarah fit into his “aesthetic vision” as Hall states but there is no coercion here, only advice and suggestions. This is a mentor speaking to a younger pupil, a wise sage giving wisdom to an oncoming genius, and it is a friend speaking

to a friend. Prentice understood some of Sarah's sorrow as he also lost his mother an early age (Piatt, "Biographical Sketch" vii). His earnest, careful uplifting of her doubt - that intense sadness was not to be included in poetry - shows his strong desire to encourage her to continue to explore where her feelings and sensibility could take her poetry. He urges her here not to deny her feelings but to use them in specific ways in her poetry to allow greater artistic expression.

This letter also reveals that Prentice was a remarkably perceptive person; he recognized that Sarah was a young woman in need of encouragement, and he generously fulfills that need. Prentice writes "Thinking that you perhaps needed, and knowing that you deserved, encouragement, I resolved to express to you my appreciation of your genius" (Piatt, "Biographical Sketch" xxiv). The fact that he would write this suggests a larger picture of Sarah struggling in some way with her feelings of self-worth or self-esteem. After a childhood of not being wanted and being shuttled between the homes of various relatives, any lack of self-esteem or feelings of unworthiness would certainly be justified. How explicit Sarah was in describing either her feelings or background is unknown, as we do not have any of her replies to Prentice. It may be possible that in this passage, Prentice is simply referring to what he read in between the lines of her letter. It is still significant that he would even comment on her need to be encouraged; the personal discussion of her feelings indicates that the relationship between Sarah and Prentice was already more than that of mere acquaintance. His words express a genuine concern for her welfare and emotional needs.

Prentice proceeds to follow through on his promise to express his appreciation of her poetical skill by making an astounding claim about Sarah's poetical genius and future literary standing. He writes, "I now say emphatically to you again, as I believe I said to you then, that, if you are entirely true to yourself, and if your life be spared, you will, in the maturity of your

powers, be the finest poet of your sex in the United States” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxiv). Even though this statement was made in a private missive, and as such Prentice was never asked to defend his claim in the court of public opinion, the importance of what he is saying cannot be diminished. Sarah had only been publishing poems in his newspaper for about a year and half, and yet Prentice, with his own vast poetical experience and with his knowledge of other female poets of the time, still resolutely proclaims that she will be next great American female poet. And, as he tells us, this is not the first time he has expressed such an “emphatically” strong opinion of her work. In order to make Sarah completely understand his faith in her, Prentice backs up his statement with the resounding words, “I say this, not as what I think, but as what I know.” He then asks her to write back and signs himself “Your friend, Geo. D. Prentice” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxiv-xxv).

After this letter, the friendship between Prentice and Sarah grew to a point where, having developed a “friendly intimacy” with Mrs. Prentice and the ladies of his household, she actually began to visit him and his family at their home; Prentice and Sarah also continued to correspond in letters filled with “familiar gossip, playful wit, and humorous pleasantries (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxxi). What Sarah thought about Prentice is unknown, because, as before, no copies of her replies to Prentice from this time of their friendship exist. However, Prentice penned his thoughts on Sarah not only in prose but in verse as well. Perhaps recalling his youthful career as a poet, Prentice wrote a poem specifically dedicated to Sarah, but he struggles in the poem to adequately define or describe her.

A larger cultural context for poems written between poets during this time broadens our understanding of Prentice’s letter to Sarah. According to Eliza Richard’s study of Edgar Allan Poe’s interactions with antebellum female poets, poetry during this time period served as a

“communicative form that enabled the exchange of ideas among individuals, within social groups, and between arenas coded as private and public” (6). Bennett discusses how newspapers would often print a poem and then print the poetical responses to that poem as well, thereby creating a public conversation about a certain topic or idea (*Poets in the Public Sphere* 31). These back-and-forth poems, though printed in a public forum, could also be more private in nature, even becoming romantic flirtations. Poe participated in “public literary romances” with more than one female poet; in the *Louisville Journal*, Sarah Piatt also participated in public exchanges of poems with other young poets, male and female (Richards 40; Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere* 34). Prentice himself was the recipient of poems from various female poets whom he had published, and Hall suggests that these sometimes took a romantic turn (225). Both Bennett and Richards reveal that poetry printed in newspapers evoked responses from readers, and that these responses could often come in the form of poems. The uniqueness and beauty of Sarah’s poetry must have moved Prentice so much that he too felt compelled to respond poetically. In doing so, he responds to Sarah’s entire printed oeuvre, which at the time his poem was most likely written,⁵ consisted almost entirely of the poems printed in his newspaper.

Even in the following brief analysis of his poem, “To Miss Sallie M. Bryan,” it becomes clear that Prentice found Sarah’s poetry irresistibly appealing, yet also puzzling. He begins the poem by describing how he cannot stop thinking about her poetry; in his first lines, he tells her

⁵ I cannot say if Prentice ever published his poem in his own newspaper or when the poem was actually written, as I did not have access to a complete collection of either the *Louisville Journal* or the writings of Prentice. I know for certain that the poem did enter the public sphere after his death when it appeared in a book of Prentice’s poem published in 1876, as this is where I found it. The title of the poem, “To Miss Sallie M. Bryan” suggests that the poem was written to Sarah before she was married therefore dating the poem somewhere from 1854 to 1861. A more precise date of 1856 is suggested by looking at inner-textual references. In the poem, Prentice describes her melancholy spirit as being “nurtured by the droppings / but of passing thunder-storms” (31-32). In his editorial comments for Sarah’s poem “A Life-History,” printed in September of 1856, Prentice again describes her poem as being “watered but by the droppings of the thunder-cloud.” The remarkable similarities between the two metaphors suggest that these two pieces may have been written around the same time.

that her “mystic tones” have “long” been “sounding” in his brain (1-2). But the connection that he describes between himself and Sarah soon deepens to more than just a reverberation or “sounding.” In Prentice’s mind, Sarah’s poetry evolves into a spiritual channel between their two souls. He cannot escape how her poetry calls to him, because, even in the “haunted dreams of sleep, / Oft to thine my spirit answers, / as deep calleth unto deep” (6-8).

As much as Prentice seems to feel connected to Sarah’s poetry, he cannot define or understand her aura of otherworldliness. At first, Prentice describes her soul as being a sea-shell that has been cast out of the sky to wander upon the rocky Earth and wither with time as all mortals must (9-16). Yet, this metaphor seems to be inadequate in his mind, because in the next stanza he then re-attempts to define her. Still, Prentice cannot be more specific than calling her a soul with “weird and wondrous power” breathing out “strange, wild music” while calling for its “own dear native world” (18-19, 24). She is a being filled with “grandeur and with gloom.” (26).

The poem struggles to accurately characterize Sarah and her poetry. For two whole stanzas, Prentice attempts and fails. He is eventually forced to move on to merely describing her poetry and thoughts as “vivid flashes” of “violet, blue, and gold” (35, 40). This failure to put Sarah into words does not appear to stem from a lack of poetical ability. “The reputation which Mr. Prentice enjoyed for his own poetry was hardly less than that which his wit and humor gave him” (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxv). Prentice’s poetry was of the “highest and sweetest order” (Shanks 552). Inevitably, this must point to the indefinable nature of Sarah herself. If, as Hall argues, Sarah was beginning to diverge from her poetical contemporaries even in her early poetry, then Prentice seems to recognize this fact as well when he describes her poetry as “strange, wild music” wielding a “weird and wondrous power” (“To Miss Sallie M. Bryan” 18-19). In the end, Prentice cannot define Sarah; he can only describe her. He ends his poem by

calling her as rare, unique, and “glorious” as an “all-beautiful blossom” that blooms only once every twenty years (43, 47-48).

Prentice’s 1855 letter and subsequent poem to Sarah reveal his private interactions with Sarah and her poetry. Although he found it difficult, he also found her poetry irresistible. It spoke to Prentice “as deep calleth unto deep” (“To Miss Sallie M. Bryan” 8). He recognized Sarah’s exceptional and distinctive poetic genius, and he saw in her the potential to be the next great American female poet. Rather than let her languish in artistic isolation in New Castle, KY, he reached out to Sarah with letters and encouragement. When it seemed she needed poetic guidance or emotional support, he was there, the friend and mentor, to offer careful criticism, helpful advice, and words of inspiration (Piatt, “Biographical Sketch” xxii,xxvii).

While encouraging Sarah’s poetry in the private sphere, Prentice also gave her poems public access and public praise when he printed them in the *Louisville Journal*. Included with most of her poems printed in the *Journal* are editorial comments by Prentice introducing the poem.⁶ Although these comments do not have a byline, Halstead attributes them as being written by Prentice (710). Prentice introduced Sarah’s first poem in the *Journal*, printed in May of 1854 by saying, “These stanzas are from a young girl who will make herself extensively known one of these days” (Prentice, Introduction to “Soliloquy of a Dying Philosopher”). By December of 1855, Prentice’s public praise was mirroring his private sentiments: “Who would look for such poetry as this from a young girl? Let her be true to her great powers, and she can accomplish whatever she will” (Prentice, Introduction to “Thoughts for Departed Autumn”).

⁶ The poems of which I speak are found from photocopied pages of the *Louisville Journal* in the Sarah M.B. Piatt Collection, Box 2 Folder 24, in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library of The Ohio State University Libraries. As this collection only contains pages from the *Journal* that contain a poem written by Sarah, the editorial comments discussed in this and the following paragraphs are limited. If other poems (and therefore Prentice’s editorial comments) of Sarah published in the *Journal* exist outside of the Sarah M. B. Piatt Collection, they are not included in this study and of course could alter the findings stated.

Although the praise is indeed high and unanimously so, it must be pointed out that Prentice gave praise to all poets who published in the *Journal* (Halstead 710). On the same day that he published and introduced Sarah's "Thoughts for Departed Autumn," Prentice also published, right beneath Sarah's, a poem by Alice Cary which he introduced by saying, "This is a perfect gem from one whose name will be recognized by all the admirers of true poetry as among the chief glories of American literature" (Prentice, Introduction to "Motherhood"). But less than a month after praising Cary so highly, in January of 1856, Prentice wrote about Sarah, "We are a prophet sometimes. Mark our prediction now. It is that the young Kentucky girl, who wrote the following and who has written several kindred pieces for our columns, will win a name that our generation will love to cherish" (Prentice, Introduction to "The Mourner in the Festive Hall"). Looking at editorial comments from the *Louisville Journal*, Prentice exalted the young Sarah with praise similar to that received by her older and more established contemporaries.

Though the type of praise that Prentice gave Sarah was not unique, the fact that he printed and praised her poems was still crucially important to her literary career, because, as Michel wrote in 1891, it made her a recognized name throughout the writers of the South (281). Other sources from Sarah's lifetime also recognize the influence of the *Journal* on her popularity. Writing in 1909, Emerson Venable makes it clear that it was through newspapers, particularly the *Louisville Journal*, that Sarah became widely known throughout Kentucky, the South, and the country as a poet ("Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt" 4004). According to sources written in 1872 and 1897, Sarah's poems in the *Louisville Journal* were widely read and appreciated (Tardy 46; Willard and Livermore 569). Prentice was not only the first person to publish Sarah's poems in numerous quantities, he was also the first to publish her poems in a nationally recognized literary forum. By printing and publicly praising her poems in his

Louisville Journal, Prentice, in essence, founded Sarah's literary career (Colvert 63). He gave her writing legitimacy, and he gave her a place in the national poetic consciousness that would have been difficult to obtain without so powerful a backer.

Another way that Prentice affected her literary career, negatively as Bennett argues, is that he was the link that enabled Sarah's introduction to her future husband, John James Piatt (Introduction xxiv, xxvi-xxvii). By the mid 1850's Prentice's hands were so worn out and arthritic by all the writing he had done that he could no longer hold a pen. Writing anything by hand had become a "painful exertion" (Piatt, "Biographical Sketch" xxv). To this end, Prentice employed an amanuensis, a personal secretary. In 1857, some of J.J.'s poems were published in the *Louisville Journal*; according to Orians, these were the first poems J.J. published (498). The poems drew Prentice's notice, and J.J. soon became the editor's new personal secretary before joining the editorial staff of the *Journal* as well (B., S.G., "Piatt, John James" 556). According to Dowler, it was through Prentice that J.J. became aware of Sarah's poetry; J.J. thought Sarah's poetry so "original and beautiful" that he made a trip to her home in nearby New Castle, KY and thus began their courtship (7). By late 1860, J.J. and Sarah were exchanging poems in the *Louisville Journal*⁷.

Just as Prentice founded Sarah's literary career, his aid to J.J.'s career was also immense. Prentice was not only the first editor to publish J.J.'s poems, but he was also responsible for his first publication in a highly regarded literary magazine. In a biographical sketch of J.J. written in

⁷ No exact publication dates are included with these poems on their respective photocopied pages from the *Journal*. However, after looking at references in the surrounding text, my dating of the poems seems accurate. On the page which includes the poem "To J.J.P," there is also a letter printed "To Northwest Conservatives" that was written on Oct 1 1860, although it may have been published after that date. On the page that includes the poems "Lines" and "An Eagle's Plume from Palestine" written by J.J. and Sarah respectively, text appears in the column to the left of the poems that reads "Lincoln will not be installed in office before [words missing] of March next." This indicates that Lincoln had been elected but not yet inaugurated, placing the publication of the poems between Nov 6th 1860 and March 4, 1861.

1912, Venable stated that it was Prentice who first sent one of J.J.'s poems, "The Morning Street," to James Russell Lowell, then the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* ("John James Piatt," 165). Lowell liked the poem and subsequently published it. Dowler argues that Prentice's initiative in sending the poem to Lowell, along with J.J.'s rekindling his friendship with William Dean Howells, was the beginning of J.J.'s own literary career (7).

After Sarah and J.J.'s marriage and subsequent move to Washington, D.C. in July 1861, Prentice's influence over Sarah waned. Although the Piatts remembered Prentice with enough fondness to give his last name as their first child's middle name, Sarah never published her poems in the *Louisville Journal* again, and J.J. took over the managing of his wife's poetry. According to Colvert, J.J. became "responsible for the publication of her work in book form" (64). Indeed, "it was only through the efforts of her husband, it seems, that P[iatt]'s work appeared in print" (Terris, 387).

Once J.J. became responsible for the printing of Sarah's work, a noticeable shift appeared in her publication forums; Sarah, for the most part, stopped publishing in newspapers. Bennett writes that after 1861, with the exception of the Capitol (owned by a member of J.J.'s family), Sarah never published seriously in newspapers again (Introduction xxviii). This may be due to J.J.'s low opinion of poems printed in the newspaper. In a letter to Lowell, written in 1863, J.J. describes these poems as mere "mediocrity" which float "their little daylight away in the newspapers." This is a surprising comment coming from a man who began his literary career in the newspaper business. However, since J.J. was now in control of the publishing of Sarah's poems, it is not surprising that, due to his low opinion of poems printed in newspapers, Sarah's poems rapidly decreased being published in newspapers after her marriage. If his attention on getting her later poems published in books and literary magazines was an attempt to gain a

greater literary standing for her poetry, he succeeded. Sarah did receive praise for her mature poems from William Dean Howells and William Henry Venable, both notable 19th century American literary critics (Venable, "Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt" 4004). If the printing of her work in books and magazines was an attempt to gain greater popularity for her poetry, he failed.

As I have previously established, the publishing of Sarah's early poetry in newspapers brought her nation-wide recognition as a poet. Willard and Livermore, writing in 1897, state that, even though her later work was "far better and more individual," Sarah's "early published poems, appearing in the *Louisville Journal* and the *New York Ledger*" were "more popular" (569). Though her mature work received high praise, it was also at times vilified (Bennett, Introduction xxix-xxx). Bennett argues that it was Sarah's radical deviance away from the norms of gentility and sentimentality in her mature poetry that led to her fall in popularity (Introduction xxviii-xxxii); however, the fact that she was no longer publishing in newspapers may also have played a key role in this decline. Without the large reading audience of a newspaper, the reach of Sarah's voice also became limited. Without the backing of a powerful, highly respected editor, Sarah's more and more present unconventionality could not withstand the negative critical reviews.

By 1876, it may be gathered that Sarah's popularity had declined to a point where J.J., acting as her press agent so to speak, had to reach back to George D. Prentice for support and re-affirmation of Sarah's poetical ability. The letter in which Prentice makes his assertion that Sarah will one day be the finest poet of her sex in America is not found in any collection of letters by George D. Prentice; its text is only found printed in a biographical sketch of Prentice written by none other than J.J. Piatt. The sketch serves as an introduction to a book of Prentice's poetry also edited by J.J. The letter is not printed in its entirety and most importantly the name

of the recipient is never disclosed; all that J.J. reveals about the recipient is that it is a lady correspondent who later became quite respected and affectionately regarded by Prentice (“Biographical Sketch” xxxi). Since the book’s publication in 1876, however, critics and biographers, myself included, have assumed that Sarah was the recipient; indeed there is no other logical conclusion to make. This assumption may have been exactly what J.J. was hoping would happen, because as Bennett argues, J.J. was nothing if not a dogged self-promoter of his and his wife’s work (Introduction xxvi-xxvii). J.J. could not openly advance or advertise his wife’s work in a book of another man’s poetry, but, by making the letter and Prentice’s opinion contained within it addressed to an anonymous woman, he found a subtle way to increase critical estimation of his wife’s work and legacy. At this time in America, as my secondary sources have shown, George D. Prentice and his opinion still held vast amounts of respect. It could have been hoped that such an endorsement would remind the public of the greatness of Sarah’s work and of how high Sarah’s popularity had been when she was publishing in *The Louisville Journal*.

The importance of the publication of Prentice’s opinion cannot be understated and is underscored by a remarkable pattern; in nearly all of the encyclopedia or biographical dictionary entries on Sarah printed after 1876 (the year the letter was first published), Prentice is mentioned along with his opinion of her greatness and the future fame she should achieve. This remarkable pattern exists in both 19th and 20th century sources.⁸ When J.J. published the letter from Prentice to Sarah, he set off a chain reaction; Prentice from then on would forever be linked with Sarah Piatt’s cultural standing. At the same time that she fell out of the American literary

⁸ See the following entries and articles: B., S. G.’s (year unknown) “Piatt, Sarah Morgan Bryan,” Collins (1878) “Mrs. Sallie M. B. Piatt,” Michel (1891) “Sarah M. B. Piatt,” Venable (1909) “Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt,” Townsend (1913) “Sarah M. B. Piatt,” Dowler (1936) “John James Piatt, Representative Figure of a Momentous Period: Biographical and Critical Study,” Kunitz and Haycraft (1938) “Piatt, Sarah Morgan (Bryan),” Orians (1962) “Piatt, John James,” and Colvert (1971) “Piatt, Sarah Morgan Bryan”

consciousness, so did he. In 1941, when Frank Luther Mott wrote his extensive treatise on the history of newspapers in America, Prentice's critical standing had fallen so far that he and his newspaper only warranted a single paragraph of text (263). By the end of the 20th century, Prentice was completely forgotten; he was not even mentioned in William Huntzicker's 1999 book on the popular press in America from 1833-1865. Now as Sarah Piatt rises and gains critical interest, Prentice must also be recovered from the murky obscurity where he has lain for almost hundred years.

Highly respected and vastly influential in his own time and for some decades after his death, George D. Prentice, like Sarah Piatt, has since been forgotten as a historical and literary figure. Paula Bennett has already made the case, and ably so, for the rediscovery and recovery of Sarah and her poetry. For his work in promoting the early career of Sarah and indeed for his own renown as a poet, wit, and newspaper editor, Prentice also merits critical interest and research. Recovering Prentice reveals the commanding role that editors of political newspapers played in antebellum America. It also adds to the discourse on the influence of newspaper editors on poets' work and popularity. Above all, through the recovery process, more than just an important figure emerges; a man and his work come to be rediscovered. Prentice had his faults; he could be proud, adversarial, and quite sharp in his witty denigrations. But, he also surfaces as a generous, powerful, exceedingly intelligent and perceptive individual. Prentice, who published a cadre of poets in his newspaper, saw the uniqueness and genius of Sarah and her poetry, and he saw it before anyone else. Without the initial guidance, encouragement, and mentoring he gave to her, a young woman inexperienced in the world of publishing and literary discourse, it is not certain whether Sarah Piatt would be known, much less respected, as a poet at

all. George D. Prentice was the first to print her, to praise her, and to legitimize her as a poetical voice in the American literary sphere.

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