

What If?

By Stephen Sakellarios, ©2023

I have provided a great deal of objective evidence for Mathew and Abby Whittier's hidden influence on Victorian literature; yet, when I submit papers to scholarly journals which are structured like legal briefs, building a case with one piece of evidence after another, I am told, "There is no evidence." It occurs to me that perhaps I haven't properly set the stage; and that instead of presenting facts, what is needed is a *tale*.

Therefore, we will gather 'round the hearth, and indulge in a good one: "The Story of the Two Dark Horses of Victorian Literature; Or, What If Academia Missed Somebody?"

Once upon a time, there was a boy of twelve named Mathew, whose friends called him "Peter Pumpkin" because he loved pumpkin pie. They also called him "some pumpkins!" because he was very bright, and very mischievous. His older brother, John, was the more staid "man of letters," who wrote serious poetry. John was a daydreamer; once, his taciturn Quaker father caught him standing with the hoe in his hand, lost in his thoughts. His father, being sparse with words, simply said, "That's enough for stand, John." Little Mathew, five years younger, *also* wanted to be a writer, but his passion was satire. He read everything he could get his hands on, written by the great British satirists and humorists; but this was not considered "real literature" by his mother, and he wasn't encouraged in it.

This family wasn't as pleasant to grow up in as the neighbors thought—his father believed in toughening the boys beyond what was really necessary, and his pious mother had a terrible private temper. But the worst of it was that neither took Mathew's literary aspirations seriously. Once, his mother admonished him, "Franklin," (she called him by his middle name, because of a superstition), "Why can't thee write serious poetry like thy brother? Why not draw from the Good Book?" So in defiance, Mathew wrote a satire on his own family, and what it felt like to grow up in that family. But nobody ever understood it:

They took old Daniel by the heels,
And headlong thrust him in,
Then all the lions waiting there,
At him began to grin.

But Daniel mustered stoutly up,
His courage did not fail;
He boxed the lions on the ears,
And pulled them by the tail!¹

Secretly, in the spring of 1825, when he was 12 years old, Mathew began sending his humorous and philosophical pieces to the big literary newspaper in Boston, the "New-England Galaxy"; and the editor, Joseph T. Buckingham, who had a soft spot in his heart for young talent, began printing them. Mathew realized that if he was to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer, he would have to run away to Boston, as he would get nowhere in the little town of Haverhill with no

support from his family. So he became a runaway, but he found a second father in Joseph, and when he lived in New York City, he found another mentor in an editor there, Jewish community leader Mordecai Noah of the “New York National Advocate.”²

Matt would go back and forth between Boston and New York, writing for the “Galaxy” and the “Advocate.” He was able to do this because he had reached his full adult height of 6’2” early, and looked older than his years. Joseph taught him, “You must write from experience.” Mathew took this advice to heart, and practiced it all his life. But at age 12, what experience did he have? Well, he was a runaway, a country boy alone in the Big City—he would write about *that*. And he was a budding satirist, even though his parents thought him incapable of writing serious literature. So he would caricature his own situation. He would write letters from home as “Joe Strickland” from “Varmount.” He had been criticized for his poor spelling, so in defiance he would exaggerate Joe’s spelling—almost every word would be comically misspelled! And there would be hilarious Malapropisms and double meanings hidden in them. For decades, other American writers, beginning in 1830 with Seba Smith and his “Major Jack Downing,” imitated Mathew’s style; but a lottery shop owner named George W. Arnold got the credit for “Joe Strickland,” because an editor wrongly assumed the first letter from Joe was a “puff” for his shop.

This was the first time that Mathew’s brilliant, original work, published anonymously, would be attributed to, or claimed by, someone else. But it wouldn’t be the last.

After a year or so, Mathew returned home and was forgiven. His older brother John was making shoes, saving up money to attend Haverhill Academy when it opened. Mathew decided to do the same, and for several months, the brothers made shoes together. But then there was a family discussion. John, who had been injured and couldn’t do heavy labor, would be reluctantly permitted to attend; but Mathew, being able-bodied, was needed on the farm. Mathew felt betrayed—there was a big argument with his father, and then a physical fight—and Mathew ran away again, at age 14, for good.

Mathew longed for a college education, but it was impossible. He would never be able to afford it. But there was another way—a most ingenious, unlikely solution. Mathew had a little friend—a squirt of a girl, from an upper-class French family (her father was a marquis), named Abby Poyen. She was only 10 years old, four years younger than himself—but she was brilliant. Mathew, himself, could justifiably be called brilliant, but Abby was really off the charts—a real brainiac. And, she was being given a full, European-style, tutored education.

Abby offered to pass along whatever she was learning, to him. In effect, he would be getting her private education. It would be by correspondence until the day when Mathew could start visiting in person. She would, of course, teach him French; and the ancient Greek classics, and the other standard subjects. Secretly, however, she had in mind to instruct him on the Mysteries—mysticism (not confined to the Catholic mysticism of her upbringing), as well as the “old ways” taught to her by her Scottish mother. But Mathew was a skeptical philosopher, despite having been raised Quaker. He would make fun of these beliefs for many years, until she finally convinced him.

So Mathew continued to write for the “Galaxy,” and he also struck up a friendship with the editor of the “Berkshire American,” Asa Greene in Pittsfield, Mass. He wrote for Greene’s paper, as well. Greene would become his editor in New York City, a few years hence.

Meanwhile, when little Abby reached the age of 13, a crisis had developed in her life. She was a poet, a singer and musician, and a nature mystic. She loved to wander the woods and fields near her home, listening to the birds, singing and writing poems. She had no interest whatsoever in the fancy, upper-class young men whom her father introduced her to. She had her heart secretly set on her older pupil, Mathew! In her eyes, he was a diamond in the rough—a rustic prince, who would clean up very nicely indeed, once she had instructed him. But in her father’s eyes, if she refused to marry a man of means, then she must prepare for a career. She could not be approaching young womanhood, wandering about the countryside! Now, few acceptable careers were open to young women in 1830. Certainly, being a poet was not one of them. Abby did extensive charity work, but there was no paid occupation of “social worker,” then. Her mother—who was on her side—suggested she could become a teacher. For this, however, she would have to take classes, to see if she could function in that atmosphere. It so happened there was a young man named Albert Pike, who said he had passed his Harvard entrance exams (whether he really had, nor not) who was teaching a class in nearby Newburyport. She could room with a family there, and take Pike’s class.

Abby, at the tender age of 13, was already a world-class mystical poet. She could write circles around her new teacher. But there was a problem—her father had darkly threatened that if this compromise solution failed—if Abby could not succeed in the class—she would have to be sent away to a finishing school in Paris! Abby dreaded the very thought of it. Such schools would crush independent-minded young women—and besides, she might never see Mathew, again! So she had no choice but to succeed. When her teacher assigned writing hymns to the Roman gods—even though Abby disliked everything about ancient Rome, and only loved the Greeks—she wrote magnificent poetry to them. Every worldly class assignment Pike gave, Abby made of it something spiritual. It was like a contest between Dark and Light.

But Pike knew exceptional work when he saw it—and he saw the potential for fame. The gods had smiled on him, because he coincidentally had the same initials as this young genius, “A.P.” If he submitted her poetry to the journals, they would assume it was his work. But if anyone figured it out, he could simply claim he was *submitting the poetry for her*. His scam was quite safe—the perfect crime. And he got away with it. From that day to this, scholars imagine that this hulking, worldly brute, an avid hunter and partier who could barely stop telling lies, and who would later support the Confederate cause as a general despite being raised in Massachusetts, wrote these deeply mystical, ethereal, feminine poems.

Meanwhile, Mathew continued to write for the “New-England Galaxy,” along with a few other young authors; and Mr. Buckingham gave him a job on his daily newspaper, the “Courier.” But there was a problem—Joseph had put his son, Edwin, who was a little older than Mathew, in charge of the “Galaxy.” Edwin was jealous of Mathew, and made life difficult for him. So when Asa Greene moved to New York City, to open a bookstore and launch another newspaper, the “Constellation,” Mathew joined him there. Mathew would pursue a mercantile career, and at the same time, write for Greene. But by mid-1830, Mathew was editing the paper, with Greene as

the figurehead editor-in-chief. He would visit his family in Haverhill; and, he would visit Abby in Newburyport! He was beginning to catch on that she had a crush on him; but she was only 14, and a petite 14, at that. He couldn't openly reciprocate, but (having been disappointed in love with an older girl back home), he took the stance of a sworn bachelor. In this way, he could reassure Abby of his fidelity, without letting on to anyone else that he was waiting for her to grow up.

Writing for the "Constellation," he developed another character somewhat like "Joe Strickland." This one was also based heavily on his own real life. "Enoch Timbertoes" was a country boy who had moved to New York City, and who had all sorts of adventures there. Just as Mathew would write to Abby's older brother, Francis, back in Haverhill—and in this way, also write to Abby without raising suspicion—Enoch wrote back home to his friend "Tim," who had a little sister "Sally." So Enoch was Mathew, Tim was Francis, and little Sally—referred to in the letters as "your Sally"—was Abby. Enoch knew that Sally had a crush on him—she was his "girl back home"—and he would reassure her. In one letter written to her directly, he said:

Your old maid aunt Louis, who is dead and gone used to say, looks is nothin behaviour is all, and I guess as to looks the York gals aint got much to boast on. They are most on em pale and sickly lookin criters, which comes of their keeping bad hours and tight lacin. They keep it up night after night in the winter time, with balls and parties, so that they get completely fagged out and look as though it was the day after washin.

* * *

You no need to be afeard of my being caught by a New York gal. My notion is still for the New England gals, let em laff as much as they will at their green bonnets and guessing--but I can tell em what it is when they ketch Enoch Timbertoes they catch a weezel asleep. But I wont say no more for fear my letter should get miscarried, or be opened by some peeking Jackson post-master, so good by & believe me

Yours till Christmas,
ENOCH TIMBERTOES.

Abby, of course, would eagerly await the next edition of the "Constellation" in the mail!

Mathew's *de facto* editorship of the "Constellation" might have continued indefinitely, except for the New York cholera outbreak in 1832. He stuck it out bravely for some months, but Abby sent word to him, in no uncertain terms: "Get out of New York!" So he returned to Boston. By this time they had officially begun courting, under the parental agreement that it remain strictly a chaste affair. This, Mathew was willing to do (though his resolve went up in smoke when Abby reached the culturally-acceptable courting age of 16). Now, with Mathew in Boston, they could see each other more often. He began writing short novels—five of them over the next two years—and Abby began work on one, herself. Mathew's novels, like all of his other works, were written anonymously, and his former editor, Asa Greene, helped him publish them there in New York. All have been mistakenly attributed, by scholars, to Greene. (After all, they didn't know anything about Mathew, or his editorship of the "Constellation.") Abby's novel, "Chanticleer: A Thanksgiving Story of the Peabody Family," was never published in her lifetime. Mathew published it for her, anonymously in 1850—about the time he was publishing her shorter works

in the Boston “Weekly Museum,” under her maiden initials, “A.P.” Because Mathew’s former editor on “Yankee Doodle Magazine,” Cornelius Mathews, owed Mathew for unpaid work from three years earlier, C. Mathews published that book for Mathew Whittier in New York, much as Asa Greene had done for him earlier. But by the time it was reprinted in 1856, Cornelius Mathews’ name appeared on the title page as the author, and scholars have mistakenly attributed the book to him ever since (even though by style it is extremely unlikely—just as Albert Pike’s authorship of Abby’s poetry is extremely unlikely).

Our story continues, in much the same pattern as you see, here; and I have left out a number of key events in the story even up to this point. Abby died of consumption in March of 1841. Mathew was indeed able to publish some of her work posthumously, though Albert Pike dishonestly claimed her early poetry for the rest of his life. Mathew privately told a friend that Pike was “a great plagiarist.” But it has only come down to us as an anonymous statement made by a “New York literary man.”³ Mathew went on to create more characters like “Joe Strickland,” including the popular “Ethan Spike,” but only one prominent person ever gave him credit for launching the entire genre—his personal friend, editor and secret collaborator, Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber, creator of “Mrs. Partington.”⁴

I have painstakingly tracked down and collected over 2,700 of Mathew Franklin Whittier’s works, and roughly 50 of Abby Poyen Whittier’s works. Many of these were mistakenly attributed to other authors of the period; quite some few were plagiarized. Their works, when stolen, made five Victorian-era writers famous (or increased their fame): Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, and Albert Pike. Others launched their careers in journalism on the strength of works stolen from Mathew; and some achieved varying degrees of fame by imitation. I have objective evidence establishing these research results beyond a reasonable doubt. The problem is, scholars have *unreasonable doubts*. And I am not able to penetrate their irrationality, which parades as rationality.

Perhaps, I thought to myself, the problem is that they simply don’t understand the back-story. So this has been a little story, explaining the back-story. Certain details have been extrapolated from a vast amount of historical data, in context, but the greatest portion of it is substantiated by solid evidence. Perhaps this is what was missing—perhaps *now* my other papers, presenting the hard evidence, will make more sense.

Footnotes:

1) Griffin, Lloyd Wilfred, “Matthew Franklin Whittier, ‘Ethan Spike,’” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Dec., 1941), pg. 649.

2) In 1826, Mordecai Noah left the “New York National Advocate” to launch his own newspaper, the “Enquirer.” Mathew continued writing for that paper.

3) Allsop, Fred W., “The Life Story of Albert Pike,” 1920, pp. 102-103: “A literary man in New York recently made the assertion that Pike was not an original thinker, but a great plagiarist.” If I

am not mistaken, the original quote was not “recent” as of 1920, but rather something Mathew Franklin Whittier had said many years earlier, which had been recently re-quoted.

4) Charles O. Stickney reports a personal meeting with Shillaber, in the Jan. 2, 1892 Boston “Evening Transcript,” quoting Shillaber as follows: “But speaking of ‘Ethan Spike,’” he continued, “he was a genius. Not in the same line as that of his illustrious brother, John G., but in his own way he was certainly out of the ordinary. He was a genuine humorist, and he founded a school of comic literature which brought out many imitators. In short, he was original, unique, and of a high grade in his peculiar line.”